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SHIFTING TERRAINS

The Depoliticisation Of Political Theatre In Pakistan

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D.Phil

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September 2009

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been previously submitted to the University of Sussex or any other University for a degree.

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the shifts in the practice of political theatre in Pakistan through the study of two theatre groups, the *Tehrik e Niswan* (The Women's Movement) and *Ajoka* (Of Today), that emerged in the 80's under General Zia ul Haque's military regime, and through newer theatre groups (*Raasti*, *Murk*, *Hayat e Nau*) and NGO-based theatre training organisations (Interactive Resource Centre, IRC) that were created or were impacted by the advent of neoliberalisation in the country in the 90's. The impact of finances not only influenced the growth of many small theatre groups that prescribed to the needs and demands of the NGOs under the broader Development agenda, but also saw shifts in the work of *Tehrik e Niswan* and *Ajoka*, from the voluntary and ideology-based nature of their work to one that was ultimately incorporated into the dominant culture. Moreover, what was evident through the work done by theatre groups under the development agenda was that theatre as a tool for social critique was depoliticised and seen as a commodity, transforming its role from self-directed activism to donor-driven activism.

One common aspect between the groups under discussion is their underlying adherence to western orientated approaches to political theatre through the theories of Brecht or Boal, which informs their work in many ways. While examining how Brecht's theories have influenced the practices of *Tehrik e Niswan* and *Ajoka*, or Boal's theories have been used and even extracted from their original context by the IRC, I also argue for a need to re examine notions about selfhood and agency that the groups advocate in their practice, through analysing or examining alternative concepts of agency in non liberal traditions and away from the dominant discourse.

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INTRODUCTION

This dissertation examines the shifts in the practice of political theatre in Pakistan through the study of two theatre groups, the *Tehrik e Niswan* (The Women's Movement) and *Ajoka* (Of Today), that emerged in the late 70's and early 80's respectively, under General Zia ul Haque's military regime, and through newer theatre groups and NGO based theatre training organisations (Interactive Resource Centre, IRC) that emerged or were impacted by the advent of neoliberalisation in the country in the 90's. I study these shifts and practices through the work of theatre companies from both the pre and post neoliberal phases and examine their emergence, ideologies, and practices through empirical study and research.

The term "political theatre" is diverse in meaning and can incorporate a range of theatrical activity. It is described as a cultural practice that operates at a level of interrogation, critique and intervention and brings under the rubric of political theatre an array of theatrical activity that ranges from acts of political intervention on behalf of a population and has a political agenda, to theatre as a political forum through plays with overtly political content, to theatre whose politics are on display and invite an actively critical stance from its audience. Although this list is hardly exhaustive, it is certain that political theatre has the capacity to foster and assist in the broader processes of social transformation.¹

These features find resonance in the work of *Tehrik e Niswan* and *Ajoka* in their early years of inception, when they practiced in the face of oppositional forces of the military state. Both groups are now the longest surviving theatre groups in the country, with the former celebrating 30 years and the latter 25 years of practice in 2009. For both, the starting points are embedded in political ideology: the resistance to Martial law and the laws against women; the leftist inclination of *Tehrik e Niswan's* founder Kermani, who took theatre as a mode of communication in her work with trade unions in Karachi; and the association of *Ajoka* founder Madeeha Gauhar with the women's movement in Lahore which resulted twice in her imprisonment. For both, Brecht's theatre for entertainment and instruction remains an inspiration. His theatre, that aimed to activate its audience and considered the achievement of

¹ Jeanne Marie Colleran, Jenny S. Spencer (eds.), *Staging Resistance: essays on political theatre*, University of Michigan Press, 1998, pp.1-2

social justice as a necessary task continues to motivate the practice of *Tehrik e Niswan* and *Ajoka*. Both groups are similar in characteristic to what Baz Kershaw describes in his study of alternative theatre in Britain. This theatre had ideological roots, aspired to make a change in the wider social and political realities, aimed to combine aesthetics and debate to establish an oppositional force to the dominant culture as well as to be populist in its appeal to draw audiences.

But while the early practice of these theatre groups was imbued in a political ideology and in protest that was provoked by the emergence of a military regime, and played to an audience that shared that ideology of protest, events such as the death of Zia ul Haque in 1988 and the advent of neoliberalisation around the 1990's set in changes for the climate of theatre in many ways. Both these events contributed in ways towards a change in the nature of political theatre.

Following the death of Zia and the election of Benazir Bhutto, state opposition to political theatre lessened considerably and theatre groups performing previously under harassment by the state were now invited to perform at the provincial government-supported annual theatre festival in Lahore. In the 1993 winter festival in fact, theatre groups played to a packed audience. During the various democratic governments of the 1990's, political theatre groups saw a gradual acceptance by the state and society alike. Interestingly though, what was evident was that the fiercely engaged political theatre that had been marginalized earlier now shifted its focus from politics to social commentary, gradually being incorporated into the dominant culture.²

In tracing the history of alternative theatre in Britain, Baz Kershaw describes one of its characteristics as expansionist in nature. Kershaw uses Raymond Williams' description of oppositional cultural forms as those that represent sharp breaks from traditional practice, but that may become part of the dominant culture of a succeeding period because of shifts in the power relations of a society. In the quest to reach an ever increasing and wide range audience,

² Hajra Mumtaz, "Theatre for Change", *DAWN Metropolitan*, Karachi, 26 July 2009, p.15

alternative theatre in Britain sought the use of popular appeal. This populist impulse presented its own set of complexities, for the aim to be both oppositional as well as popular placed performance on the very fine line between resistance to, or incorporation into, the status quo. So while on the one hand alternative theatre may have contributed to significant changes in the dominant culture and the social and political milieu, on the other hand it may well have been absorbed into the dominant culture through “repressive tolerance”, neutralising the oppositional ideologies and reinforcing the status quo, thus creating the dynamics of successful opposition and debilitating incorporation.³

The second influencing event, the emergence of NGOs and donor driven organisations in the 1990's helped establish theatre groups that were both small or large, independent or connected to NGO's and saw the materialisation of theatre that was played to specific communities and was entirely issue based. This climate seemed so financially profitable that it encouraged the emergence of a special training organisation in Lahore; the IRC for theatre based on Augusto Boal's Forum Theatre techniques. At the same time, the need to financially sustain themselves prompted both *Ajoka* and *Tehrik e Niswan* to also seek similar projects or funds that would allow them to sustain their practice. With the end of a military government and the election of a new democratic government, *Tehrik e Niswan's* and *Ajoka's* radical protest changed to a more calculated political work played for the urban audience. As the climate of protest subdued, so did the nature of their audience change from politically aware labour movement groups, farmers and political workers to a more sophisticated urban middle class that found appeal in the theatre that offered a combination of entertainment and activism. This is not to say that the two groups did not have a following in the urban audience in their years of protest. However, with the environment of protest no longer existent, the balance of the political expression in their work shifted from the charged rallies, workers' unions and women's forums to a more sophisticated expression for the urban middle class audience, who then became the primary audience for *Tehrik e Niswan* and *Ajoka* in the years following the end of the military regime.

³ Baz Kershaw, *The Politics of Performance. Radical Theatre as Cultural Intervention*, Routledge, London and New York, 1992, pp.4-8

In this dissertation I argue that following the end of a military regime and subsequently the onset of neoliberalisation in the 90's in Pakistan, a shift occurred in the nature of political theatre whereby under the development agenda, theatre as a tool for social critique became depoliticised and transformed into a commodity, and the nature of activism transformed to become paid activism. While *Tehrik e Niswan* and *Ajoka* maintained their political ideologies but also became part of the dominant culture, the emergence of smaller theatre groups that played to the agendas of NGOs and funding bodies, created plays specific to the issues projected by the organisations they were linked to, and played to audiences that were directly connected to the NGO organisations. In seeking to meet with the financial pressures of survival once the voluntary nature of theatre gave way to more monetarily motivated work, both *Tehrik e Niswan* and *Ajoka* also sought means to survive either through the association with foreign funding bodies (*Ajoka*) or through the incorporation of donor generated projects that were commissioned according to the funding organisations' demands (*Tehrik e Niswan*).

Effects of depoliticisation of public life can also be seen in the work produced by the electronic media or newer theatre groups that have emerged in the recent years. Censorship policies imposed by the government have relaxed considerably over the years compared to the times when making critical comments about the government was met with strict measures. Following the opening of innumerable private television channels, the producers nevertheless still seem to create programmes that are apolitical and more inclined towards entertainment.⁴ The same is to be said for new theatre groups which range from English language groups that re enact musicals such as *Chicago* to packed houses, or the newly formed state supported National Academy of Performing Arts (NAPA) that considers reviving Urdu classics or adaptations of diverse western texts as sound material for its repertory plays.

This dissertation does not aim to set up the two different examples of theatrical practice presented here against each other as a means of comparison. Rather my aim is to understand the shifts that have occurred in the practice of political theatre through the changing political and social conditions of the country, that have also contributed to the emergence of these

⁴ Hajra Mumtaz, *ibid*

practices and have helped them to either flourish or to undergo some change. So while the 80's presented an environment conducive for protest and encouraged the growth of theatre groups like *Tehrik e Niswan* and *Ajoka*, the neoliberal environment of the 90's perpetuated an upward spiral of theatre groups that flourished because of the donor agenda. At the same time, the post Zia ul Haque period also identifies the role of *Tehrik e Niswan* and *Ajoka* as groups that have now well established themselves. While both groups continue their practice with an emphasis on political content, with aesthetics and form informing their plays with literary and stylistic concerns, the theatre groups working under the development umbrella have more immediate targets at hand and work in a more direct fashion that is appropriate to their objectives. In drawing out these parallels I do not argue for the significance of one group over the other. Rather what I hope to unpack is the underlying meaning behind this discussion; the relationship between political activism that is characterised by its radical and political nature, and sustains itself through voluntary work, and the development work which is not political, is motivated by the donors' agenda and is certainly a means of financial income. What emerges through this is that in a neoliberal environment dictated by funding, the nature of political theatre, which is an instrument for socio political critique and artistic expression, is commoditised and made dependent upon market relationships. Activist theatre, which is a socio cultural resource, is uprooted and reinvented to become a source of capital gain for the donors, NGOs and the theatre groups that work for them, and also becomes a means to inculcate very specific notions of both governmentality based on depoliticised social rather than political agendas, and modernising agendas (such as health campaigns, birth control, or campaigns against discrimination against women).

I structure this dissertation by beginning with drawing in the historical contexts of political theatre in Pakistan, followed by an introduction to *Tehrik e Niswan* and *Ajoka*, their practices and an analysis of their ideologies and stylistics concerns in the light of the work of practitioners and theoreticians like Bertolt Brecht, Badal Sircar and Paulo Freire. While both groups find similar objectives in their work to Brecht's concerns, I draw an analysis of some specific plays through his theories as well as Sircar's, whose work is also in the Brechtian tradition. I also analyse a play by *Ajoka* through Freire because the play addresses issues close

to Freire's theories of emancipation of the oppressed through dialogue. Boal is known for his significant ideas of breaking down the barrier between the actor and the spectator. He worked closely with his friend Paulo Freire who in turn had developed his ideas on adult education for the Brazilian peasantry. Boal saw links between Freire's ideas and those of Brecht's who sought an active and engaged audience rather than a passive one that fed on theatre as merely a form of entertainment.⁵ I then introduce the growth of Development in Pakistan and the emergence of theatre groups that practice specifically to service NGO agendas. In examining works by theatre groups working under the development agenda, I draw attention to the shift of activism to paid activism, the commoditisation of theatre which had served as a tool for socio political critique, and the depoliticisation of public life brought about by development agendas.

This discussion is followed by an argument that comments upon the possibility of examining notions of selfhood and agency in alternative ways than the means drawn up by western liberal thought processes. Boal's emphasis on the emancipation of the spectator to an actor and Brecht's theories on the engagement of the spectator as a critical thinker are both essentially viewed within notions of western liberal thought. I reference Boal here in the context that his theories have been largely adapted by Development agencies in the west towards community-oriented theatre. By examining theories influenced by western liberal thought that emphasise the construction of a self regularised individual as a necessary aspect of the globalised world, I draw attention to the hegemony of such theories that undermine alternative notions of selfhood in non-western thought processes, and the need to critique them.

With a view to engage more critically with notions of agency that are deployed in activist theatre and theatre under the Development agenda in Pakistan, I follow in the last chapter Saba Mahmood's arguments constructed around the need to look at concepts of agency and selfhood outside the western liberal tradition. Mahmood's ethnographic study of the women's Mosque Movement is the basis of her questioning liberal feminist assumptions that lie beneath critiques of practices (such as veiling) that are considered to be subordinating and oppressive towards Muslim women. In her debate, Mahmood challenges the secular liberal feminist concepts that

⁵ Jane Plastow, "Practising for the revolution? The influence of Augusto Boal in Brazil and Africa", *Journal of Transatlantic Studies*, Vol.7 Issue 3, Routledge, London, September 2009, p.295

demarcate ideas of gender equity.⁶ Women's participation in this movement is part of a larger Islamist revival that has spread through Egypt and forms a response to what is considered the westernisation and secularisation of Egyptian society.

In exploring the challenges that the women's Mosque Movement poses to secular liberal thought, Mahmood seeks to analyse the concepts of self and moral agency that strengthen the practices of this non-liberal movement. In doing so she aims that the material provided through her ethnographic account "speak(s) back" to the normative liberal assumptions about human nature against which a movement such as this is held accountable. These assumptions, such as the belief that all human beings have an intrinsic desire for freedom, that all humans seek autonomy when allowed to do so, and that human agency can be understood as acts that challenge social norms and not those that uphold them, have become integral to humanist intellectual traditions. The participation of women in a movement that sustains principles of female subordination poses problems for feminist analysts. While women are seen to assert their presence in a previously male dominated space, the language they use to enter these spaces (such as veiling) are also those that secure their subordination. So, women's subordination to feminine virtues such as shyness, or modesty seem to be the necessary conditions for their role in religious life through this movement.

There has been considerable work in the social sciences since the 1970s that has studied how human agency operates within structures of subordination. (Janice Boddy, Lila Abu-Lughod are discussed in the final chapter in this context). These studies have sought to understand how women resist the dominant male order by subverting predominant cultural practices and redeploying them instead for their own interests. Studies within this framework identify religious traditions as conceptual and practical resources for women that allow them to redirect and recode them in terms of their own interests and agendas. This recoding then represents the site of the women's agency. In such an analysis agency is understood as the capacity to realise one's interests against custom and tradition and other collective or individual

⁶ Suhraiya Jivraj, "Book Review", *Feminist Legal Studies*, Vol.15, No.2, Springer Netherlands, August 2007, p.247

obstacles. Thus when conditions permit, the underlying humanist desire for autonomy can emerge in the form of an act of resistance.⁷

To articulate this point, Mahmood draws in the example of Boddy's ethnographic study of the *Zar* cult in northern Sudan; a healing cult which is largely comprised of women and uses Islamic idioms within its practice. Embedded in a male dominated sphere, the *Zar* nevertheless serves as a counter hegemonic process, where women use ways, that might be considered as instruments of their oppression in the West, to articulate their agency collectively (through ceremonies they organise) or individually (through making choices regarding marriage), thus creating a dynamic that is complementary with men. This then, articulates the means of resisting and setting limits to domination.⁸

In discussing the contrasts between two ethical orientations, Matt Waggoner brings to light the construction of autonomy between liberal and non-liberal traditions. He identifies these as ethical embodiment and ethical irony. While ethical embodiment denies the ideal of autonomy, that is the emergence of agency as a result of moral being, (achieved when a subject chooses against its nature to live according to higher principles), ethical irony reformulates autonomy, wherein, ironic engagements with the natural conditions that give rise to subjects enable a kind of autonomy that is understood not as an ability to escape those conditions but rather to recognise their inescapability and point beyond them.⁹ Discussing Mahmood's concept of embodiment, Waggoner highlights how Mahmood challenges the notion of autonomy based on the Enlightenment discourse that asserts abstractly constituted subjects whose thoughts and behaviours are unaffected by historical, cultural and social determinations. Mahmood maintains that liberalism projects a Western distinction between desire and social conventions onto non-liberal subjects; a distinction she maintains that cannot be presumed to be a universal trait in the formation of a subject. In saying this, Mahmood is challenging Western

⁷ Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety. The Islamic revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 2005, pp.2-8

⁸ Saba Mahmood, "Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival" *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 16 (2), Blackwell Publishing, Oxford UK and Malden MA USA on behalf of American Anthropological Association, Arlington, May 2001, pp.205-206

⁹ Matt Waggoner, "Irony, Embodiment, and the 'Critical Attitude': Engaging Saba Mahmood's Critique of Secular Morality", *Culture and Religion*, Vol.6, No.2, Taylor and Francis, July 2005, p.238

models of subjectivity that associate agency with an inner ego, made up of thought and desire and independent of extrinsic conditions. Mahmood's employment of the concept of embodiment implies the realisation of one's nature through concrete expressions and habits, through the cultivation of the self. For her, Muslim agency is distinct from western forms of agency in its connection to the habituation of prescribed norms of the culture, rather than to the expectation to question or become individual to the society. In other words, individualism is a western model of moral and political agency that does not translate cross-culturally.¹⁰

Mahmood's work is informed by post structural theorists and their insights on power and the constitution of the subject. The arguments of Judith Butler in particular are central to her work, who in turn draws insights from Foucault. According to Foucault, power is not something that is deployed by individuals over others, but rather must be understood as a force that permeates life and produces new forms of desires, objects, relations and discourses. Secondly, the subject does not come before power relations but rather is produced by them as they create the necessary conditions for the subject's possibility. Central to this formation is what, in following Foucault, Butler calls the paradox of "subjectivation", wherein the very processes and conditions that secure a subject's subordination are also the means through which she becomes a self-conscious identity and agent. In other words, the subject's inherent ability to define her modes of agency is not something that existed prior to the operations of power but are rather the products of those operations. Such an understanding allows us to conceptualise agency as something that is not the same as resistance to domination but is in fact a capacity for action that specific relations of subordination create and enable.¹¹ Butler critiques resistance as a reiterative structure of norms that not only consolidates a given discourse of power but also provides the means for its destabilisation. This analysis enables her to locate the possibility of resistance to norms within the structure of power rather than outside of it. By examining this doing and undoing of norms, Mahmood explores how different modalities of moral and ethical action contribute towards the formation of particular kinds of subjects.¹²

¹⁰ Waggoner, *ibid*, pp.247-249

¹¹ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety. The Islamic revival and the Feminist Subject*, *ibid*, pp.17-18

¹² Jivraj, *ibid*, p.247

While drawing from Butler's work, Mahmood departs from it in the manner that agency is considered. To elaborate the above point Mahmood draws in the example of a pianist who goes through the disciplinary regime of practice to master her ability, (the requisite agency) to play the instrument. While her agency here is affirmed by her ability to be taught, and may be associated with docility, the latter term implies her malleability to be instructed in a particular skill and suggests her struggle, effort and achievement rather than passivity. Such a manner of understanding agency draws our attention to the way in which individuals work on themselves to become willing subjects of a particular discourse. Agency may therefore be understood more in terms of the capacities and skills required to undertake particular kinds of acts (such as resistance) and as something that is bound with historically and culturally specific disciplines through which a subject is formed.¹³ What follows then is that the desire for freedom from norms or for their subversion is not an innate desire that motivates all beings at all times, but is rather mediated by cultural and historical conditions. With this in mind, if the ability to effect change in the world and in oneself is historically and culturally specific, then the meaning of selfhood and agency cannot be predetermined and must emerge through an analysis of particular concepts that enable specific modes of being. Viewed in this way, what may appear as a case of deplorable passivity from a progressivist point of view, may actually be a form of agency that can be understood only from within the discourses of subordination that create the conditions of its enactment.¹⁴

This concept is reiterated in Laura Ring's ethnographic study of women's lives in a lower-middle-class urban apartment building in Karachi that is characterised by the multiple ethnicities inhabiting it. For Ring, this building is a site for documenting forms of sociality that are created and inculcated by the women who live in it. Ring describes the ways in which women produce and challenge the everyday peace of life in the space they inhabit.¹⁵ Rather than stifling empowerment, the building's spaces provide for the construction of the women's political subjectivity and agency. In a multi-ethnic environment where maintaining peace is

¹³ Mahmood, "Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival" *ibid*, p.210

¹⁴ Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety. The Islamic revival and the Feminist Subject*, *ibid*, pp.14-15

¹⁵ Magnus Marsden, "Review", *Modern Asian Studies*, Volume 44, Issue 2, published online by Cambridge University Press, 27 February 2009, p. 441

imperative, the women perform peacemaking through a neighbourly exchange of everyday transactions built around daily activities such as cooking, sewing, shopping, cleaning. While the gendered spheres created through women's secluded spaces render the women dependant, the women's exchanges within them are intense and disciplined by their own discourses.¹⁶ In forging relations with one another, the women work towards emotional regulation and management through which they seek to handle the tensions that flow inevitably through their circuits of exchange.¹⁷

Through a series of "angry men" stories that exemplify the force of irrational male violence in women's lives, Ring is able to formulate how women construct a culture-specific discourse on deterring male anger. Through a series of narratives around honour killings, Ring notes that the essential focus of the stories narrated to her was not on infidelity or dishonour, but rather on the men's anger that had a defining influence on the women's lives. But while women seek to manage male anger, they are also seen as complicit in reproducing it, thereby generating the very emotions that they seek to manage. For instance, a particular neighbour responds more passively to her five-year-old son's anger towards his six-year-old sister, and reprimands the daughter for not accommodating his behaviour, serving a lesson for the daughter to defer to male anger. In the women's narratives, male anger is seen as uncontrollable, whereas female anger is presented as qualitatively different. In one of Ring's accounts about how she was teased in the neighbourhood and proceeded to tell her husband about it, the women in the building were horrified because they believed invoking male anger was dangerous and would lead to bloodshed. In their opinion, had Ring managed the matter on her own by feeling anger and handling the matter directly with the culprit, she could have managed the situation better. And when Ring argued that she could not for instance evoke anger in herself to confront the culprit, she was told that it was something that had to be inculcated within through habit. This reflects similarity to Saba Mahmood's account of how modesty (*haya*) amongst the women in the Mosque Movement can be inculcated through habit. Emotions such as anger, believed Ring's neighbours, could be inculcated if Ring allowed herself

¹⁶ Maggie Ronkin, "Review", *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Volume 66, No.4, published online by Cambridge University Press, 29 October 2007, pp.1206-1207

¹⁷ Marsden, *ibid*, p.442

to show anger a few times, following which “feeling angry” would come naturally to her. Here Ring notes that female anger is considered as more tactical and an act of containment compared to the volatility of male anger. Of course the question that comes to mind immediately is that if emotion is a matter of discipline, then why is it that men cannot control their anger? Expecting Ring’s husband to have confronted an attacker in a road-rage incident, the women of the building considered it inconceivable that he did not beat the man in response to such a provocation. The difference Ring discovers, is in the contestation that surrounds the designation of male anger as a virtue or a vice. Male anger was viewed as not merely an inevitable facet of masculinity but even as a necessary one. So while the women lamented the presence of male anger in their lives as a volatile force, they also cultivated it.¹⁸

Within this discussion we find evidence of the agency Mahmood speaks of, as the women of the apartment building work on themselves to become willing subjects of a discourse. The women live within a male dominated sphere but control the force that dominates their lives through managing the men’s anger tactically and through practices of exchange that forge relations amongst the women. The articulation of such culturally specific moments of reflexivity is also evident in Magnus Marsden’s ethnographic study of village Muslims living in the region of Chitral in northern Pakistan. By providing an insight into the lives of the Chitrali Muslims and how they perceive their world, Marsden contributes another significant voice in the debate that examines the complexity of Muslim culture and traditions. By providing a different example of Muslim self-understanding, Marsden’s study provides a contrast to the anthropological studies of selfhood and agency in non-Western traditions. Marsden’s research may be positioned between the reductive understanding of Western liberal thought and Islamic notions of agency as situated on opposite ends of the pole. In doing so he draws attention to a more nuanced understanding of the cultivation of critical selfhood in non-Western societies.

Using journeys or “tours” to explore their region, the Chitralis reflect complex concerns beyond their knowledge of Islamic doctrinal standards and associate movement outside the confines of their villages with a curiosity in difference. Chitral is characterised by a great deal of

¹⁸ Laura A. King, *Zenana: Everyday Peace in a Karachi Apartment Building*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 2006, pp.105-113

internal heterogeneity and is viewed by Chitralis as one that offers numerous possibilities of difference. These tours provide Chitralis with possibilities to both recognise the potentials beyond the inescapability of the conditions that shape their everyday lives and understand these events with self-reflection, self-interrogation and openness toward unpredictability. In a region of Pakistan that is profoundly Islamised and dominated by the hegemony of political Islamists who have sought to fashion Muslim life according to Islamic precepts, the Chitralis do not regard the heterogeneity of their region as an obstacle but rather, appreciate its diversity that adds another dimension to the region's wider significance. These journeys configured through diverse historical, moral and sacred landscapes are processes of negotiation through which Chitralis from a very young age are trained to learn the correct moral and emotional dispositions attached to particular places. The Chitrali tours are an everyday social practice that are purposefully employed by the people to distance themselves from the sectarian differences and status distinctions that permeate their everyday lives. Marsden points out that there is an important ethnographic dimension to these tours that goes beyond the encounter with exotic others within the realm. Through these tours, Chitralis are encouraged to recognise how heterogeneous people, things and processes are put together in ways that challenge the completeness of the cultural formations to which one might think they belong. The emphasis the Chitralis place on the pleasures of discovering knowledge about their region brings to attention the dangers of assuming that a pre-existing community of knowledge lies behind Chitrali self understanding. Rather Chitral's diversity is considered of local importance because it gives the region the possibility of ceaseless exploration. In the midst of an ever growing body of anthropological work on the relationship between identity and mobility, Marsden's study of the Chitrali tours aims to challenge the notion that the most important forms of mobility today are global. In exploring the way in which Muslims perceive and interact with their worlds, Marsden's research also provides broader insights into the existing body of work that reflects on the complexity of collective and personal forms of Muslim self-understanding. More importantly, Marsden argues that the study of such modes of critically perceiving the world stand in contrast to anthropological depictions of Islamic ethical selfhood amongst piety minded Muslims in urban settings and such a consideration of contrasting forms of Muslim self understanding illuminates much about the complexity of the Muslim world today. In Chitral's villages where religious

knowledge has expanded in strength, many Chitralis have cultivated other strands of mindful existence along with the need to live pious and virtuous Muslim lives, and these have been built through complex local traditions such as travel. The manner in which Chitralis live questioning and thoughtful lives, Marsden argues, cannot be reduced to a model that compares Western notions of secular liberal autonomy on the one hand to Islamic traditions of piety on the other. Instead, such modes of living require one to be attentive to the everyday factors that lead people to cultivate the claims of reflexive, independent, critical selfhood in shifting political, religious, moral, historical and personal junctures.¹⁹

Mahmood sees a conflict between Western feminism and an appropriate understanding of the social significance of the Mosque Movement. Western feminism shares with secular liberalism a universal set of suppositions about the subject and agency, about how autonomy may be realised through basic rights and protection and how personhood may be achieved through free expression of will and through one's desires. She is clear in her arguments that Muslim agency may not share the same goals as Western agency regarding emancipation, and the desire for freedom may not be universal or something that feminism can assume is desired or rightful for all women. Mahmood is critical of post-structuralist feminism of imposing the Western humanistic tradition onto non-Western subjects when it presumes that the imperative of feminism is to analyse and promote conditions for the emancipation of women. Although post-structural feminism does critique universalist conceptions of autonomy as independent from external conditions, Mahmood critiques its normative goal that continues to be liberation from and resistance to social norms, and its failure to understand forms of agency that are directed at the embodiment of those social norms even when the norms are in opposition to the subject's interest. In identifying this debate, Mahmood is critical of those feminists who adhere to the notion that women should be self-determined in the conditions in which they live, and when they are not, they should find ways to struggle against the lack of freedom.²⁰

¹⁹ Magnus Marsden, "A tour not so grand: mobile Muslims in northern Pakistan", *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, Vol.15, Issue s1, Published online by Royal Anthropological Institute, 9 April 2009, pp. S59-S72

²⁰ Waggoner, *ibid*, pp.250-251

In the distinctions made between different theoretical orientations, and my discussion of Saba Mahmood's ethnographical research and the theories that inform it, I aim to reinforce the point that Mahmood makes succinctly in her argument; the imperative need to understand in a politically and socially informed way those practices which we may consider objectionable, by taking into consideration the desires, aspirations and motivations of the people to whom these practices are important. Mahmood emphasises the need for an openness in exploring non liberal traditions as part of a responsible scholarly practice, strengthened by the willingness to re-evaluate one's views in light of the Other's.²¹ The discussion on Mahmood's analysis also calls for a more critical understanding of the notions of agency that theatre groups I speak about in this discussion adhere to. Whether it is the activist theatre that uses Brecht as its model, or the theatre under the Development umbrella that uses Boal's work in its methodology, both streams project notions of agency that are inherently Western in their approach. Through Boal's analysis and critique of Brecht and Aristotle's coercive system of tragedy (discussed in chapter Four), we understand that Brechtian theatre, and as a consequence Pakistani activist theatre, establishes a particular kind of relationship between the audience and the performance that leads to a specific form of agency for the spectator through self-reflexive critique. In critiquing post-structural feminism's failure to understand alternative forms of agency that embrace and embody those social norms that seemingly appear against the subject's interest, Mahmood draws attention to a form of agency constructed through habituation and accommodation that must be understood within its cultural specificity. Saba Mahmood's analysis brings to light an alternative means to engage with notions of agency within the specificity of Pakistani culture and its complexities.

While my discussion begins from the politically motivated theatre in Pakistan from the 1980's this does not necessarily mean that there was no theatre in Pakistan before that, or that other groups did not bear a political inclination. Certainly linkages may be formed between the practice of *Tehrik e Niswan* and *Ajoka* and groups such as the Karachi-based leftist group *DASTAK*, or the smaller lesser-known theatre groups that were supported by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's government. While tracing a historical chronology of theatre in Pakistan, I find evidence

²¹ Mahmood, "Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival" *ibid*, p.225

of these politically motivated theatre groups that have practiced for both long and short periods of time, and have in some sense served as the predecessors of the political work of the Karachi-based *Tehrik e Niswan* and Lahore-based *Ajoka* have undertaken in their practices. Whether these earlier practitioners were performing plays on social reform in the 1950's (Khwaja Moenuddin), or were associated with the Communist Movement and creating plays that were evidence of their political ideology (Munir Chawdhury, in the early 50's who was actively involved in the Language Movement that demanded the recognition of Bengali as a national language), or were practitioners who came from the tradition of Leftist political theatre of the Indian People's Theatre Association, (IPTA), such as Ali Ahmed who formed the group NATAK or Aslam Azhar and Mansoor Saeed who headed the group *DASTAK* in the 1970's, these practitioners formed the background for the political work that was undertaken in the 80's by *Tehrik e Niswan* and *Ajoka* under Zia ul Haque's military regime. In undertaking to study the latter two groups, I acknowledge the background of political work that was conducted through theatre in the decades before the 80's and the inception of *Tehrik e Niswan* and *Ajoka*.

My initial investigation on the history of theatre in Pakistan led me to the research of Kathryn Hansen, whose study of Parsi theatre led me to its association with Urdu theatre and its tracing by many Urdu scholars to the foundation of Urdu Theatre. Following a lead in one of Hansen's notes, I found myself at the *Majlis e Taraqqi e Adab* (Society for the Promotion of Literature) a library in Lahore that maintains journals and books on early Urdu literature and drama. Some of these Urdu books (Ishrat Rehmani, Saleem Akhtar) have been useful in helping me trace the beginnings of Urdu theatre to Parsi theatre because of its association with Urdu itself. Other English research on theatre in Pakistan is also available in the writings of lecturer / researcher in Theatre Studies at Utrecht University Eugene van Erven, and the section on Pakistan by Don Rubin in *The World Encyclopaedia of Contemporary Theatre*, Volume 5, both providing documentary evidence of wide range of theatrical activity in Pakistan since after Partition. Erven's 1992 book *The Playful Revolution. Theatre and Liberation in Asia*, works in the author's own words, as a sequel to his 1988 book *Radical People's Theatre* which traces the rise and fall of the popular political theatre movement in the West between 1965 to 1985. In the 1988 book Erven argued that radical theatre in the West had declined because it was

affected by “irreversible cooptation mechanisms”, but could derive new inspiration from the political theatre movement that was then developing in several Asian countries. While Erven identifies some Western theatre practitioners like Peter Brook and Eugenio Barba to have employed traditional forms and folk traditions from Asian theatre in their work, he asserts that there is more to contemporary Asian theatre than epic traditions, stylised motions and dramatic deconstruction of ritual, which these practitioners have overlooked. The contemporary theatre movement in Asia that Erven identifies in *The Playful Revolution* is what he describes as one that has embraced as well as rejected traditional Asian forms and is a theatre that does not shy away from calling itself political. For this theatre, Erven coins the phrase “theatre of liberation”. Under this title, Erven brings the work of countries like the Philippines, South Korea, India, Pakistan, Indonesia and Thailand to the fore where theatre in villages and cities alike has fostered contacts in the form of international theatre workshops and co-productions.²² Perhaps it is the exchange of theatre activities in the form of workshops and performances between India and Pakistan that justifies the inclusion of a chapter on Pakistan in his book. The section dedicated to Pakistan traces a chronology of theatre activities in the country since after Partition, in the light of political conditions that backgrounded most events. Erven visited Pakistan in 1988, and most of his research was gathered around this time through interviews with practitioners such as Aslam Azhar of *DASTAK* and Shahid Nadeem of *Ajoka*. Given that *DASTAK* no longer exists, the section on the group is valuable information that reinforced and extended the information I gathered from my interview with *DASTAK* co-founder Mansoor Saeed. Erven’s visit to Pakistan in 1988 was also at a time when *Ajoka* was relatively new (four years) and the account of its work is based on observed performances that include a workers’ rally and the death anniversary commemoration of a leftist leader. There is also a strong sense of the early political activism of *Ajoka*’s work in Erven’s writing, reinforcing the political conditions in which it arose and in which it was practicing then. Accounts on other groups include a short section on *Tehrik e Niswan* and their activities during Erven’s visit in March 1988, and one on the *Punjab Lok Rehas*, (Punjab Popular Theatre) an offshoot of *Ajoka*, comprising of members who broke away because of political and language issues. What is

²² Eugene Van Erven, *The Playful Revolution. Theatre and Liberation in Asia*, Indiana University Press, 1992, pp.xi-xv

interesting here is that one of the founders of this very political group is named as Mohammed Wasim, who now runs the training centre for Forum Theatre techniques under the Development agenda, a subject of detailed discussion in this dissertation in chapter 6. While Erven's account dates up to 1988, the *Punjab Lok Rehas* still practices in Lahore, with a strong Punjabi nationalist ideology. Several of my attempts to speak to their members or set up appointments in Lahore were thwarted and went unheeded during the course of my research. As a documentative and analytical account, Erven's essay on Pakistani theatre in a vital and politically vibrant period in the country's history serves as a valuable historical document.

A more recent book on "alternative theatre" in Pakistan is *A Critical Stage. The Role of Secular Alternative Theatre in Pakistan* by Fawzia Afzal-Khan, published in 2005. Comprising of seven chapters, four of which were previously published in journals between 1997 and 2001, this book argues that "parallel theatre" (as opposed to commercial and English language theatre) presents a cultural response to the oppressive state apparatus, be it in the form of military regimes or Islamist ideologies. Afzal-Khan identifies *Ajoka*, the *Punjab Lok Rehas* and *Tehrik e Niswan* as the main practitioners of this parallel movement, and argues that through their work and by training other theatre groups who work at the grassroots level, these groups have aided the development of a rudimentary yet genuine peoples' theatre movement.²³ With her unique background as a scholar based in the United States as well as a performer for three months with *Ajoka* in 1987, Afzal-Khan presents her view of the group's strong political stance while also contemplating her own position as an insider to the subject. Focussing her research largely on the Lahore based *Ajoka* as well as the *Punjab Lok Rehas*, her essays address gender and class politics, the role of community theatre and their links to NGOs, and the exploration of the connection between post-modern capitalism and the resurgence of Islamic fundamentalism in the work of the above mentioned theatre groups. While she critiques the role of the NGOs and their funding agenda, she does consider all the smaller groups funded by them to be political in nature because they employ theatre as an awareness-raising tool. Some underlying contradictions surface here when she hails the work of *Ajoka* or *Tehrik e Niswan* as political in the argument, but later categorises them as "theatre folks first, political and cultural

²³ Fawzia Afzal-Khan, *A Critical Stage. The Role of Secular Alternative Theatre in Pakistan*. Seagull, Calcutta, New Delhi, 2005, p.6

activists second” with a more mercenary attitude, compared to the smaller community theatre practitioners (funded by NGOs), who regard conveying the message to be of primary importance and theatre as a tool to raise awareness rather than an end in itself.²⁴ What she does seem to miss in this argument is that the smaller community theatre groups under discussion also receive funds from NGOs and are not necessarily situated within the grassroots movement, such as the NGO *Bedari* which is funded by organisations like CIDA (Canadian International Development Agency) and NORAD (Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation) and is located in a bungalow in a “genteel residential neighbourhood suburban Islamabad”.²⁵ So while there is a realisation of the perils of donor driven projects, the writer does embrace the work of these community theatre groups as meaningful. For their part the work of *Tehrik e Niswan* and *Ajoka* in this field is acknowledged through the training workshops they conduct for smaller theatre groups working in the community. Here lies, in my opinion the basic difference of approach to the subject between Afzal-Khan and myself. While she critiques the Development agenda, she does not extend the argument for a similar analysis of the theatre groups working under them, whereas as I argue in this dissertation, these groups are either victims of or party to the Development agenda, that has depoliticised the very tool Afzal-Khan advocates as political. Nevertheless her book does generate a more personal analysis of the theatre panorama because of her own involvement with *Ajoka* temporarily. In comparison, Erven’s account may be seen as an impression gathered from a short visit in which information is generated through some first-hand observations as well as from discussions with practitioners. Both books give more emphasis to *Ajoka* because of their connections and access to its practitioners in Lahore.

When Pakistan was created after Partition in 1947, the years of its inception saw much turmoil and teething problems. Where matters of greater importance were at hand, theatre found little support from the state. This along with the migration of many theatre practitioners to India meant that the conditions for the development of theatre in Pakistan were not good. Sporadic groups came and went but it was in the 80’s when Zia ul Haque’s martial law projected the entire society towards drastic change that political protests took to the streets through

²⁴ Afzal-Khan, *ibid*, p.88

²⁵ Afzal-Khan, *ibid*, p.78

various movements. In an environment that brought together many activists under one cause, the women's movement also found support in its activism through the work of both *Tehrik e Niswan* and *Ajoka*.

I find it necessary to draw a historical background for theatre in Pakistan in order to understand the antecedents of groups such as *Tehrik e Niswan* and *Ajoka*. I examine the conditions prevalent in both pre and post partition years to understand the nature of theatre that was practiced and the historical and political contexts that informed it. With the creation of Pakistan, a strain that is evident is the establishment of a national language as part of a need to unify a culturally diverse new nation under the banner of a national identity. Hence I find it necessary to discuss briefly the arguments that foreground the establishment of an ideology for a new nation and the symbols that become its identification, and particular to this discussion, the Urdu language. In all the Urdu books I researched on the subject, researchers mark the beginning of Urdu theatre with Parsi theatre, a form that was flourishing in Bombay till the 1930's and influenced some of the early Urdu playwrights of Pakistan. With Urdu being associated to what is discussed as Pakistani theatre in these documentations, I discuss links with Parsi theatre not only for its language and the fact that many later playwrights were Muslim (and therefore automatically claimed by Pakistan as their own), but also for the form of the Parsi plays which were influenced by folk traditions that later also informed the work of both *Tehrik e Niswan* and *Ajoka*. My account of the pre partition period also examines the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) a left wing group that encouraged dramatic activity and promoted a more socially rooted culture through its plays. IPTA's mention is deemed necessary because some of its practitioners came to Pakistan after 1947 and joined theatre groups that carried similar political motivations in their productions.

These inherited historical and political contexts, along with the social conditions that saw little or no development or support of a sustained theatre tradition, resulted in sporadic theatre activity in post partition Pakistan. In my survey of these years I examine the theatre activities in the light of Pakistan's the turbulent political history.

I examine the practice of *Tehrik e Niswan* and *Ajoka* in the light of Brecht's stylistic as well as theoretical approaches, and make particular references to methods that provoke the audience towards critical thinking. I draw examples of formal devices the groups have used to emphasise Brecht's technique of breaking the realism of theatre and reminding the audience constantly of its impermanent nature. This along with an emphasis on a combination of action and aesthetics facilitate my analysis of their work through specific examples. Apart from Brecht, the two groups were also influenced by Indian political theatre practitioners such as Safdar Hashmi and Badal Sircar. Hashmi was the founder of India's foremost political theatre groups *Jan Natya Manch*, whose script *Aurat* (Woman) was part of *Tehrik e Niswan*'s repertoire for both community and urban performances. Sircar's group *Satabdi* grew from his involvement of the "third theatre", which aimed to provide alternatives to state owned and commercial theatre.²⁶

In examining the neoliberal influenced theatre that has impacted the work of some theatre groups through the growth of NGOs, I study the work of particular theatre groups that have emerged as a result of the conditions conducive to their practice. These groups are studied in the light of the influx of donor driven NGO activities in Pakistan that have impacted the nature of theatre and spiralled a mushrooming of large and small theatre companies throughout the country. The advent of forces of neoliberalism and globalisation created a surge of NGOs in the 90's in Pakistan and instigated a growth in the use of theatre as a tool for development by NGOs, creating numerous theatre groups that cater to the donor funded and issue based agenda of the NGOs. The growth of NGOs in Pakistan must be seen in relationship to the spread of neoliberalism globally, and in Pakistan's context I discuss this in the time post Zia ul Haque. I discuss the theatre group *Raasti* (The Path of Truth) and the training centre, the Interactive Resource Centre (IRC) as case studies to support this discussion. For both these groups, the issues prioritised by the donor agencies and NGOs are the prime focus of their plays. While *Raasti* works on a contractual basis using theatre as one of its tools to project the agenda of the NGO it works for, the IRC is a closer in its ideals to a capacity building organisation that trains employees of other NGOs in the methods of Augusto Boal's Forum Theatre as a tool for empowerment. It is financially supported by a host of international NGOs

²⁶ Afzal-Khan, *ibid*, p.13

and given the specific nature of its work, the IRC mostly trains representatives of NGOs and in most cases does not have direct contact with the target communities. I also discuss issue-based Karachi-based NGO *Aahung* which aims to improve the quality of services that uphold sexual health and rights. The plays commissioned by *Aahung* are studied to understand the working processes involved in such projects, and the kind of impact they may have on its target communities. In the same vein I also examine the issue based theatre that *Tehrik e Niswan* took on as commissioned projects by funding organisations and the contrasts and similarities such work bore on its main practice. For all the cases discussed within this area, a common thread is the short-term contract that denies the practitioners long term contacts with the communities they work with, reducing means of measuring efficacy and also strengthening the donor driven agenda of achieving quantative goals.

For all the theatre groups under discussion in this dissertation, whether they are born in response to the military dictatorship of the 80's or a product of the neoliberal culture of the 90's, measuring efficacy is a near impossibility. This is true for any form of political theatre, as I discuss through the theories put forth by Baz Kershaw in his study of alternative theatre in Britain. But Kershaw puts forth certain preconditions that contribute towards measuring the efficacy of this alternative theatre, that I find necessary to discuss in the context of the case studies I present here. Whether it is a shared ideology or the context of the audience that impacts ideology, I find this discussion relevant towards understanding levels of efficacy in the practice of the Pakistani theatre groups.

The shifts in the political fabric of the country and the changes that have occurred in the political culture itself that have created the depoliticisation of the society have in turn influenced the shifts in the practices of both *Tehrik e Niswan* and *Ajoka*. Celebrating their 30th and 25th anniversaries respectively in 2009, both groups tread the fine balance of maintaining their ideologies through their work, albeit to a select and faithful audience, and succumbing to the financial lure of donor-funded projects and/or annual sponsorship. While both groups still work with communities, it is sporadic, mostly not voluntary in nature, and certainly not a central part of their practice anymore. This shift, while influenced by changes in the political fabric of the

country, nevertheless has altered the political inclinations of both groups from defiant and raging voices in the face of oppression to sophisticated artistic establishments that maintain a political edge in their selection of adapted or original scripts that address pertinent political and social issues, and perhaps this altered situation suggests that political theatre in Pakistan could not survive for more than its initial few years, after which for various reasons it was gradually co-opted in the mainstream of dominant culture.

Another aspect I draw into the discussion is the influence of western theories in the work of the two different frameworks of practice discussed. While Brecht still continues to inform and influence the work of *Tehrik e Niswan* and *Ajoka*, Boal's work is integral to the practice of the IRC and its Development agenda. I say this with respect to Boal with the understanding that Boal's work emerged from Brazil, but I take it in the context that it has been adopted by western development agendas as a means to perpetuate their goals, and therefore falls under the larger umbrella of a western approach. Both theorists advocate emancipation, agency and freedom from oppression, and it is these ideas that also imbue the work of the theatre groups. What I wish to indicate through this argument is that these are western liberal notions of agency and have been framed with a western analytical approach that has its own cultural and historical framework. Through the work of Saba Mahmood and Lila Abu Lughod, I draw attention to alternative ways of thinking about notions of agency, power and resistance in order to extend the understanding of non-liberal traditions. I hope to argue through these debates that unless viewed at from more complex dimensions, ideas of agency and selfhood that are perpetuated in the theatre productions of these groups may run the risk of either reductionism or, without a renewing of critique and analysis, be at peril of being stuck in time. This is certainly a sentiment I experienced when I last week attended *Ajoka's Dekh Tamasha Chalta Bunn* (Watch the Show and Move On), originally produced 17 years ago in 1992, and came away with a feeling of watching an example of a work relevant only for its place in history. Certainly I could understand why the work would have been popular seventeen years ago, when the style of a relatively new theatre group that engaged with Brecht's methodologies would have produced surprises and engagement through its form. The presence of a narrator who broke the continuity of the narrative to remind audiences they were watching a play, the insertion of actors who got up

from amongst the audience, were all devices that Brecht theorised. Certainly the political message was still relevant, but it is not to the credit of the company but more to the tragedy of Pakistan that I lend such attributes to. Apart from updating some dialogue with reference to Swat, most of the text remained unchanged, but it read very much as an activist play that got its message across. The play may have received a great response in 1992 because in troubled times, when protest was manifested in many ways, attending a play with political content was also a means to participate in the protest. But how long can ideologies sustain themselves as times change? How much is it necessary to renew knowledge and critical debate? In the concluding chapter I draw in the example of an *Ajoka* play within this discussion to demonstrate how reductionism can imperil a work if it approaches the discourse in a very linear fashion.

Certainly, for a dissertation that suggests at the outset that not much sustained theatre activity can be seen across the Pakistani landscape, the last six months would be enough to disprove any such statements. Beginning from March 2009, the citizens of Karachi have been given the opportunity to attend two anniversary festivals, *Tlism* (Magic) by *Tehrik e Niswan*, and *Musafat* (Journey) by *Ajoka*, each showcasing seven plays from their respective repertoires. *Ajoka's* festival had already been launched in Lahore before its presentations in Karachi. Following this, *Katha*, another Karachi based theatre group from the early 90's which started with political inclinations and turned to a more commercial bent, has renewed its practice after five years and made a comeback with a play that is based on the English play *Educating Rita*. Apart from this, the National Academy of Performing Arts' (NAPA) Repertory produces a play every two months. Underlying all this is the huge role finances play in the possibility of such productions. *Tehrik e Niswan's* festival was conducted through a collection of private and corporate funds. *Ajoka's* finances are comfortably secure for the next three years after the renewal of its grant from the Norwegian Embassy. *Katha's* play was sponsored by the Rotary Club of Pakistan for a charity and tickets were priced double of what *Tehrik e Niswan* or *Ajoka* charge. And NAPA receives its funds from the Federal Government since it was initiated under the patronage of General Musharraf in 2005. And most recently, the Pakistan National Council of the Arts, operating under the Ministry of Culture held a National Drama Festival in Islamabad spread across a period of a month and a half, and boasted the participation of 30 known and

lesser known theatre groups from across the country. One cannot say whether this collective renewed energy is to be sustained or written off as occasional, but for the groups that have to their credit worked through more than a quarter of a century, it certainly is an opportunity to assess and renew their means of sustenance, practice and critical analysis.

My personal interest in this subject arises from my own engagement with *Tehrik e Niswan* as a performer since 1997. Initiated for the first time to such a dynamic medium naturally influenced my respect for the theatre group that also worked in low-income community theatres in Karachi and its surroundings. This also formed the basis of my MA dissertation that examined the role of their work through Boal and Freire's theories of empowering the disenfranchised. While *Tehrik e Niswan* has never made Boal's Forum theatre methods part of its work, I wrote about connections that were to be made in the theatre group's objectives to raise opportunities for discussion and debate in their post production interactions with the audience in the communities. This work was paralleled throughout with productions for the urban audience, each influenced through selections of politically engaging scripts, mostly adaptations of writers like Brecht, Beckett, Lorca, Badal Sircar, to name a few, all influential in their times towards politically engaging work. Both *Tehrik e Niswan* and *Ajoka* worked with original scripts as well as adaptations of political plays pertinent to the social and political conditions prevalent in the country in their early years of practice. For both groups, the ideology and plays of Brecht emerged as one of the means to ground their own ideological and political position, and a method to formally and textually provoke thought in their audience as a resistance to the Martial law regime that lasted till 1988.

Methodology

In writing this dissertation I draw upon my experience of working with *Tehrik e Niswan* as an actor since 1997. Invited to join a workshop after expressing my interest to do so, I attended one conducted by a visiting director Syed Jamil Ahmed from Dhaka for a forthcoming production based on the Tales of a Thousand and One Nights. My training as a visual artist drew me towards contributing to the design aspect of the play, but once selected as an actor for the same production, I discovered a new form of expression that has remained a passion ever

since. In the course of the twelve years of my association, I have acted in community performances as well as urban theatre productions in Karachi, as well as in Lahore, Islamabad and Quetta. *Tehrik e Niswan's* representation in international festivals has taken the team to India on many occasions, the last one being the National School of Drama Festival in Delhi in January 2009. The journey as an insider has been a revealing one, and one that has allowed for opportunities to examine the work theoretically. Following my MA dissertation I later found myself questioning the role of community theatre and the development landscape it is embedded in, as well as my own interaction with it.

My association with *Tehrik e Niswan* lent a precarious position of an insider, naturally presenting the problematics of being unable to detach myself from the subjective position that is associated with such a situation. In the course of the research I had to constantly negotiate between my position as an insider and that of a scholar aiming to gain sources of knowledge in a field that I was very much embedded in. I found myself enacting and being perceived in different roles depending on the contexts of the research interviews I conducted, engaging with shifting identities as researcher-theatre practitioner as the project proceeded. I was also aware that my position as a member of *Tehrik e Niswan* bore the possibility of influencing the way other theatre groups spoke about it or their theatre experiences, depending on their own position in the debate and their relationship with the more seminal groups like *Ajoka* and *Tehrik e Niswan*. This association had its own set of advantages and disadvantages. The latter perhaps because there had to be an inevitable subjectivity in the research and analysis and required me to step out of the work especially while conducting the interviews. Often the interviews required a sifting of the information received through a series of digressions as well as some overly enthusiastic discussions that verged on self-projection. And perhaps this association has also been a knowledge that has remained the undercurrent of some interviews I conducted with other practitioners. I have conducted interviews with people who have either been contemporaries of Kermani or have trained with her and this reference has in most cases appeared in their conversations. The advantages came in the form of easy access to other theatre groups. Documentation and press report archives were readily available at *Tehrik e Niswan* and *Ajoka* offices, making it easy to obtain a historical context on the research. Apart

from these groups, I also gained access to current literature documented in the community theatre offices along with scripts and DVDs of plays and projects provided by them, *Ajoka* and by the Karachi based NGO *Aahung*. Given that I could not observe all the work of these groups or organisations, the DVDs have been the main source of my analysis of the plays and projects that I have written about in this dissertation. And of course, direct access to *Tehrik e Niswan's* documentation and scripts was a privilege that came without question.

In a paper that discusses the position of an anthropologist as an insider, Kirin Narayan questions the authenticity of the insider in any given research. Anthropologists who write from an insider position about their own cultures do so from a position of intimate affinity. But many scholars argue that because a culture and society are heterogeneous, and a distance needs to be created in order to problematise a lived reality, the notion of an insider anthropologist is open to question. In the given circumstances of shifting identities and a field of interpreting communities and power relations, Narayan argues against the fixity attached between what she terms “native” and “non native” anthropologists. Given that the points along which researchers are aligned to or set apart from those they study are varied and subject to constant change, she argues for a re orientation in the ways that anthropologists are perceived as inside or outside a society.²⁷ In a similar vein Rosaldo Renato argues that social analysts should explore their subjects from a number of positions rather than being locked into any one particular one. While classic social sciences associate impartiality with the detached observer, producing an objectivity that stands in contrast with the supposed “prejudice and distortion” which derives from subjectivity, Rosaldo argues that social analysts can rarely become detached observers. He argues that there is no formula by which one may remove oneself from the mutual conditioning of social relations and human knowledge. Culture and culturally positioned subjects are tied with power, which is in turn shaped by cultural forms, making both inextricably intertwined. When forms of social knowledge are discussed, the social positions of both the

²⁷ Kirin Narayan, “How Native is a “Native” Anthropologist?”, *American Anthropologist*, New Series, Vol.95, No.3, Blackwell Publishing on behalf of the American Anthropological Association, September 1993, pp.671 and 682

analysts and the human actors must be considered and read according to their social identities and the experiences that have shaped them.²⁸

Perhaps it is the multiple positions that I was located in during the research that allowed me to gain knowledge from various positions or identities. Whether it was the distance I sought in gaining knowledge about the various ideological positions that the theatre groups were located in, (the political stance of some or the adherence to the commercial community theatre aspect of the others), or whether it was the advantage I gained as a practitioner that allowed me to further inform the field of knowledge that was based on my own experience, I found myself located within various positions nearer or distanced from the field. Narayan refers to Rosaldo's term "multiplex subjectivity" to highlight the crosscutting identifications that every anthropologist needs to exhibit in a research project. Whether insiders or partial insiders, the researcher is drawn closer in some contexts and is drawn apart in some, highlighting the multiple planes of identification across cultural groups. Facets of identity that come into focus need to change during the process according to contexts. In speaking of these shifting currents, Narayan quotes Stuart Hall's comment on cultural identities that also apply to personal identities. Hall suggests that cultural identities despite having histories undergo a constant transformation and are subject to a continuous play of history, culture and power, allowing identities to be associated with the different ways we position ourselves by and within narratives of the past. A researcher will find his relationships with the subject complex and shifting, highlighting different aspects at different times.²⁹

In an area of research not very removed from the one I undertook, Fawzia Afzal-Khan negotiated with her position as an academic based in the USA and a Pakistani who spent some time in her native Lahore and worked with the theatre group *Ajoka* as a starting point for her research. Trained to leave out the subjective self in academic discourse, she found that her approach to this project would have to undertake the "personal is political" insight in her work. Afzal-Khan follows the debates that encourage the rethinking of the insider position of a

²⁸ Renato Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth. The Remaking of Social Analysis*, Routledge, London, 1993, pp.168-169

²⁹ Narayan, *ibid*, pp.675-676

researcher, and dilute the lines between the participant and observer. She situates herself as a “native anthropologist” and concurs with Anuradha Kapur’s view that it is necessary to end the myth of the perfect spectator who serenely presents a seamless overview.³⁰

It was indeed a matter of finding the precise balance between being an insider and an outsider that formed the balance of my research. Rosaldo asserts that the optimum field worker is one who situates himself as one of the people yet remains an academic, shaping his persona as the “participant-observer”. Stating the example of the Japanese-American ethnographer Dorinne Kondo, who found in her research in Japan to raise questions within herself regarding distance and proximity to the subject, Rosaldo is speaking of the dilemmas of identification as a source of knowledge. While her being Japanese allowed Kondo to get incorporated easily into the groups she was working with, she also found herself inhibited in some areas where she could not raise certain questions or cross cultural lines. This experience led her to conclude that the social analyst is at once cognitive, emotional and ethical. For her, knowledge can be constructed through shifting power relations that involve various degrees of intimacy and distance. Instead of arguing for detachment Kondo aims for the recognition of multiple sources of knowledge in her analysis.³¹ In Kondo’s example, the plurality of an observer’s identity is given precedence to the unified coherent self, so that the sources of knowledge make her one with cognitive, ethical and emotional capabilities with varying social identities, such as woman, researcher, and Japanese-American.³² I understand the dilemmas of identification that Rosaldo refers to in my own negotiations while speaking to peers such as *Ajoka* and *Tehrik e Niswan* founders where I found myself gaining easy access to their lives, histories, and their practices, but also reluctant to raise certain questions that challenged their practices and ideological positions.

With little written material available on the subject of theatre in Pakistan, most of my research is drawn from a range of research materials, from primary fieldwork data through personal interviews, and secondary theoretical data such as press reports and documentation

³⁰ Fawzia Afzal-Khan, *A Critical Stage. The Role of Secular Alternative Theatre in Pakistan*. Seagull, Calcutta, New Delhi, 2005, pp.25-26

³¹ Rosaldo, *ibid*, pp.180-181

³² Rosaldo, *ibid*, p.194

on the plays (electronic and print) as well as literature available on the cultural, political and historical perspective on Pakistan.

I began with data collection in the area I was more familiar with. A range of interviews with theatre practitioners in Karachi and Lahore set the initial tone of the initial research. My aim was to get an idea on the histories of the groups as well as their current practices to draw an analysis of how the changes in the socio-political environment in the country had affected these practices. These interviews, while fairly structured also yielded narratives and digressions that were not necessarily relevant to the discussion but gave me a chance to cross check and weigh the accuracy of the historical data across the board. Some interviews required re visiting after I had compiled the information to inform some unanswered queries or to further the discussion. For instance interviews with *Ajoka* and *Tehrik e Niswan* needed revisits once I began to work on the Development aspect of theatre in Pakistan, in order to understand the groups' own position on this feature of their practice. The interviews also provided leads for me to pursue the secondary theoretical literature in a more directional manner. Press reports provided quantitative information on the plays, and scripts, project reports and DVD recordings also became a means of my analysis of the works themselves. The aspect of Development that I undertook in my thesis was an area I was totally new to at the beginning of the research. This area was also informed by primary and secondary data so that interviews conducted at NGOs or with community theatre practitioners provided first hand narratives and practical information, substantiated by the profuse amount of project reports and play documentations available with these groups. The theoretical analysis was supported by the range of literature available on the subject, which allowed me to formulate my argument in a more cohesive manner.

The primary and secondary data allowed for different levels of analysis for the research. Primary fieldwork data such as interviews as well as secondary data of the literature such as the scripts, press reviews and printed documentation set the stage of the argument in terms of setting the information on theatre in Pakistan in its historical and political contexts. The content of the plays, and the historical as well as analytical contexts were provided by my own analysis of the plays as well as by the input provided through the interviews. The content of the plays

additionally provided a sense of the political and cultural debates around the subject from the point of view of both the two seminal groups under discussion as well as the newer development-based groups I interviewed later. All of this material was then put into its theoretical perspective by the theoretical literature on the subject of theatre in Pakistan (albeit limited) as well as the range of theoretical debates on the Development agenda. The discovery of this new subject matter yielded interesting surprises when I found theoretical arguments supporting my analysis of the Development-based theatre in Pakistan through interviews and scripts.

It was the relationship between the narratives gained through interviews and the information analysed through the literature available on the groups that created the direction of my research. The relationship between the narrative and analytical aspects of research is one that Narayan argues must aim for an enactment of hybridity wherein the specificity of experience does not oppose theory but rather embodies it. This hybridity makes reference to the duality of the personal and ethnographical self that every anthropologist carries with himself, wherein he belongs to both personal and professional worlds. For Narayan, an effective analysis is one that builds directly from cases evoked from narratives, which then provide the opportunity to step back, reflect and frame the details of the narrative at hand. While narrative and analysis are categories that are often set up on opposite ends of the pole, Narayan argues that they are contiguous and open to cross-overs. While she argues for a hybridity in the multiple positioning of the researcher's identities, she also calls for an enactment of hybridity in texts that are informed by and incorporate lively narrative and rigorous analysis.³³ It was with the progress of these cross-overs that I was able to formulate the argument in a more determined manner, extracting a relationship between the two disciplines I had undertaken in my research. The research itself grew in a more organic manner, often directed by the information I gathered as I proceeded. So while the sections on theatre on Pakistan developed simultaneously as primary and secondary sources informed the research, I began the section on Development with primary data collection and then sought the theoretical debates to substantiate my argument.

³³ Narayan, *ibid*, pp.681-682

In the course of the past four years during which I have undertaken this research, I have continued to perform with *Tehrik e Niswan*, largely in the urban theatre productions. I have travelled with the group to places in and outside of Pakistan, worked closely with the development of certain scripts, and have even directed my first play in 2008. This continuous hands on interaction with the theatre group that is so much a part of my research has allowed me to reflect and analyse the changes and developments my own thought processes have been through. In particular the 30 year anniversary festival celebrated this year by *Tehrik e Niswan* has been an intense working experience as well as a means to analyse, many years on, the group's own methods of working as well as the nature of the urban audience compared to its initial years that I discovered through this research. I have conducted eighteen recorded interviews with past and present practitioners of *Tehrik e Niswan*, *Ajoka* and *DASTAK*, and practitioners of theatre in the development sector. Apart from Karachi, my research has taken me to Lahore and Islamabad, sometimes specifically to conduct interviews and at times on work related trips that have facilitated the possibility of meeting practitioners and observing their methods of working and workplaces. Furthermore, the peculiar situation of working outside the university environment has opened a world of academics accessible through the electronic media. My annual visits to the University have facilitated library research and a collection of texts that along with my fieldwork research have opened a platform for me to define and formulate the debate that has informed this dissertation.

CHAPTER 1

Historical Antecedents

While theatrical activity can be described in Pakistan as sporadic since the country's inception in 1947, it nevertheless still resonates on the cultural landscape today. As groups emerged and disbanded, they left a mark that became part of a collective history of inherited traditions for the next generation. It is with this acknowledgment that I trace the historic background of theatrical practice in Pakistan, with a view that groups such as *Tehrik e Niswan* and *Ajoka* did not enter a field bereft of tradition. These inherited traditions then become a pool of resources that new theatre groups build upon and renew in their own practice.

This chapter does not claim to present a survey of the entire spectrum of theatrical activities before the inception of *Tehrik e Niswan* or *Ajoka*. Instead I examine those prevalent practices that bore some sort of direct or indirect impact on these two groups as they proceeded to extend the dialogue, as well as add new dimensions to theatre in Pakistan. These groups in turn provided a ground for the subsequent practices of the groups that emerged in the neoliberal era of development theatre.

In studying the historical, political and social contexts of the theatre practiced, I begin this chapter primarily from the post partition era when theatrical activity was seen as either a continuation of practice after some practitioners migrated to Pakistan from India, or as new work that emerged as a result of influences of these practitioners. Seen in the light of the prevalent political and social conditions of a new country, some of the early plays were projecting issues of social reform, whereas later groups became voices of dissent against the dictatorial regimes. In order to understand the linkages Urdu scholars have made between the Urdu language and the eclectic Parsi theatre of the sub continent which used Urdu as its prime language, I dedicate a brief section of the chapter to the pre partition period, and trace some of these associations with a view to understand the building up of a genealogy in academics of Urdu drama. I also discuss the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), as one of the precursors to theatre in Pakistan with the view that some Muslim practitioners migrated here and carried forth their political ideologies in their work.

The post Partition period (1947-80) is examined in the light of the politically turbulent years of Pakistan, the conditions that ultimately gave rise to a climate of protest in the 80's and subsequently perpetuated the emergence of *Tehrik e Niswan* and *Ajoka*. Emerging from this environment of protest, both groups had from the very beginning shown their own political inclination in their support of workers' movements and the women's movement that emerged as a reaction to Zia ul Haque's anti women laws. In

the 30 odd years under discussion here, one can list several theatre groups that emerged and worked for both long and short periods of time, and while both the theatre groups under discussion may or may not have been directly influenced by the several theatre companies in Pakistan's early decades, their mention is necessary to understand the antecedents of *Tehrik e Niswan's* and *Ajoka's* practice.

Theatre in Pakistan had never been a force for change and had always struggled for survival. From the time of the country's inception, there is evidence of some theatre activity despite the struggle of forming a new nation. Pakistan inherited a tradition of theatre that Muslim practitioners from India brought with them upon migration in 1947. But the new country had many other priorities to attend to and attention to the arts remained a lesser priority as far as the state was concerned. In this environment we have evidence of individuals who set up private establishments and worked on their own initiative until state support came in.

The evolution of theatre may be studied in the light of Pakistan's complex beginnings, the social and political history of Pakistan and the circumstances that may have impacted its growth in its initial years. In its complex history, theatre in Pakistan cannot be perceived without understanding the socio political background of Pakistan and the circumstances that influenced the development of its practitioners' agendas. Apart from this there is a range of theatre practices before and after partition that directly or indirectly influenced the dramaturgical forms that emerged in the practice of several theatre groups. The landscape of 62 years presents a varied, albeit sporadic development of literary, commercial, political and ultimately developmental theatre servicing an array of objectives and motivations. Before embarking upon the post partition theatre journey, I briefly highlight two pre-partition developments that had an impact on early theatre in Pakistan in the section that follows. The first, a connection with the Urdu language based Parsi theatre of the subcontinent makes linkages to the lineage of Urdu theatre to Parsi theatre by some Urdu scholars. Traces of the form of the Parsi theatre are found in the stylistic use of folk traditions in later theatre groups, and one of the later Urdu writers for Parsi theatre Agha Hashr, who migrated to Pakistan, became a prominent figure in the history of early theatre in Pakistan. The second, is the influence of the Indian People's Theatre Association, (IPTA), a national level theatre movement that challenged the influence of the colonial rule. Of the practitioners who opted to migrate to Pakistan, some belonged to the IPTA and brought the ideology of the movement with them.

PRE PARTITION

Tracing Genealogies - The establishment of Urdu as a symbol of identity, and Parsi theatre as the founder of Urdu Drama

In an article that looks at the way language constructs new identities, Tariq Rehman speaks of the new modern Pakistani state to have inherited the vocabulary of modern nationhood in the form of symbols of unity, such as the flag, the historic narrative, the census, the map and with relevance to this discussion, language. Urdu was established as a symbol of the Muslims in British India with an aim to construct a unified national identity based around religion (Islam) and language (Urdu).³⁴ Rahman presents the argument that the alliance between Urdu and Islam was forged by the British during colonial rule, who replaced Persian with Urdu on the lower levels and English at the higher levels in parts of Northern India and what is now Pakistan. Dissemination through education, the advent of modernity and additionally becoming the language of religious writings, Urdu emerged as a part of the Muslim identity, and along with Islam became a contributing factor towards the demand of the Muslim community in India for a separate nation.³⁵

Having established Islam and Urdu as the two identity symbols that helped secure a separate nation for the Muslims in the subcontinent, Pakistan was born in 1947 in an atmosphere of uncertainty and insecurity. It faced economic challenges, inherited virtually no industry, and also found that the markets for most of its products were in India. The non-Muslim industrial class, who had in the past dominated what was now Pakistan, transferred its capital and migrated to India. Financial uncertainties were enhanced, as the transfer of Pakistan's monetary assets held by the Reserve Bank of India became a less than smooth process because of the hostilities between the supporters of Indian National Congress and the Muslim League.³⁶

³⁴ Tariq Rahman, "Language, Modernity and Identity", *DAWN Magazine*, 11 February 2007, p.1

³⁵ Tariq Rahman, "Urdu as an Islamic Language", *Annual of Urdu Studies* Vol. 21, Centre for South Asia, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2006, p.101

³⁶ Husain Haqqani, *Pakistan. Between Mosque and Military*, Vanguard Books, Lahore/ Karachi/ Islamabad, 2005, p.11

These circumstances perhaps allowed little room for the development of cultural activities on any official level immediately after the inception of a new country. We find sporadic evidence of theatre activities after the emergence of Pakistan although a private arts council run by artists, poets and writers was established in 1948. By 1962, the state began formulating ideas for a national theatre, and in 1963 established the Pakistan Council for National Integration, an organisation that was built with the aim to create national integration and sponsored performances that subscribed to that intention.³⁷

However Urdu scholars trace the history of theatre in Pakistan not from the country's inception in 1947, but rather from the history of performance from the subcontinent as well as its association with language, literature and culture. Perhaps one of the reasons of the documentation of the history of Urdu theatre in Pakistan by these scholars stems from the fact that Urdu is recognised as the official language of Pakistan. Another perhaps, that the theatre that emerged after partition did have an enormous contribution of the Urdu speaking communities that migrated to Pakistan from India after partition, and the theatre that emerged then was naturally in Urdu. The aim of this discussion is not to deny the existence of any theatre activities in any other languages or regional dialects prior to, or after the birth of Pakistan. The study of theatre in a language that has dominated performance in Pakistan in the last sixty years however does establish the fact that a large amount of work has been done in Urdu and theatre has evolved and developed in this language particularly.

In its complex history, theatre in the Urdu-speaking communities emerged intermittently in diverse forms, from traditionalist drama to political satire, and from English drawing room comedies to crass slapstick humour. The academics that have traced the origins of Urdu theatre have identified Parsi theatre of Bombay initiated in the 1850's, as the beginnings of theatre in Pakistan because of Parsi theatre's emphasis on the Urdu language when the form had reached its peak of popularity and had found a diverse range of audiences beyond the Gujarati speaking Parsi community. Most writings by Muslim authors that I have come across do acknowledge the alignment between Urdu drama and Parsi theatre beginning in the mid

³⁷ Jan Marek, "The Impact of Islamic Culture on Urdu Drama", *Die Welt des Islams*, Bd. 23, Nr. 1 / 4, Brill Academic Publishers, 1984, p.123

nineteenth century. It must also be said here that Urdu theatre was prevalent in Lucknow and Bengal before Parsi theatre reached its height in Bombay, but the development of Urdu theatre in the sub continent is discussed primarily through Parsi theatre in most writings on the subject.

Anna Suvorova asserts that Urdu theatre showed a more consistent development compared to the regional theatres in India, spreading it at a national level while the regional ones remained more local. She describes Urdu theatre to set the theatrical climate in cities as widespread as Dhaka, Lahore, Rampur, Lucknow, Benaras, Bombay, Hyderabad, Jaipur Srinagar, Delhi and Agra. While she states statistics listed by the Urdu scholar Nami that record four thousand plays written by 323 playwrights, she also considers the Urdu theatre network to have influenced other theatrical traditions in Marathi, Sindhi and Hindi. Suvorova suggests that one of the reasons why Urdu theatre came to the forefront of theatrical activity in India in the nineteenth century was because Urdu was the lingua franca of the time and therefore it was only natural that the Parsi theatre, which was the most popular and professional theatre of the time would take it up and develop it alongside its drama in Gujarati.³⁸

Kathryn Hansen notes that the scholarship on Parsi theatre is in three different languages (Urdu, Hindi and Gujarati) and there is extensive material written in Urdu on the subject that favours the Muslim playwrights. In fact Hansen's research on the subject brought her to Pakistan since most plays commissioned by the Parsi theatre companies between 1870 and 1915 were written by Urdu playwrights. Hansen's research finds that these Urdu plays were first published in Bombay in the Gujarati script, and catered to the Gujarati, Memon and Khoja communities who were native speakers of the Gujarati language and literate in the script.³⁹ Given that the scholarship on Parsi theatre is found in three languages, there is evidence that it is deeply divided along communal lines. In studying these writings, Hansen observes that these texts reflect both religious and linguistic alignments, each claiming ownership to their contribution to Parsi theatre. So while the Urdu writers claim ownership of the genre through the

³⁸ Anna Suvorova, "At the Threshold of Urdu Theatre", *Early Urdu Theatre. Traditions and Transformations*, Research and Publications Centre National College of Arts, Lahore, 2009, p.16

³⁹ Kathryn Hansen, in: "Events, Inquiries, News, Notices, Reports", *Annual of Urdu Studies*, Volume 14, Centre for South Asia, University of Wisconsin—Madison, 1999, p.365

contribution of the Urdu playwrights, the Hindi or Gujarati playwrights deride the Urdu playwrights for Parsi theatre as hacks or mere scribes.⁴⁰

Scholarship on Parsi theatre by Urdu writers

It is with the notions of linguistic and communal affiliation perhaps then, that we find the post partition writer Imtiaz Ali Taj undertaking the task of transliterating early Urdu dramas in the Parsi repertoire in 1960 in Pakistan. This ambitious task resulted in 14 volumes that comprised of full texts of 42 Urdu plays written for the Parsi stage, supported by commentaries by Taj and later Sayed Vaqar Azeem. Taj was able to supervise the first six volumes before his death and the remaining were completed by Azeem.⁴¹ Taj's task, according to Hansen, of transliterating and publishing these works in Urdu formally incorporates Parsi theatre with Urdu drama. It is also worth noting that the volumes are published by the state sponsored *Majlis e Taraqqi e Adab* (Society for the Promotion of Literature) and the reproduction of these plays in independent Pakistan not only reaffirms the status of Urdu as a national language, but also "reminds us of the persistent value attached to the concept of a national drama, and of the need for a body of literary texts that can represent the drama in university syllabi and research archives."⁴²

Ishrat Rehmani in his study of the evolution of Urdu Drama states that neither Muslim nor Hindu writers in Parsi theatre were acknowledged till 1880, and since they worked as employers of the Parsi Companies, the plays were produced under the name of the Parsi Theatre owners. In fact he goes as far as to claim that Urdu plays written in Dhaka before Parsi theatre was well known, were later brought to Bombay and re written under the titles of various Parsi theatre companies and acknowledged as their own. Rehmani lists these plays to verify his argument. Nevertheless whether this assertion is verifiable or not, it is clear that the authorship of the Parsi plays was only acknowledged after 1880 when the theatrical companies grew in

⁴⁰ Kathryn Hansen, "Parsi Theatre, Urdu Drama, and the Communalization of Knowledge: A Bibliographical Essay", *Annual of Urdu Studies* Vol. 16, Centre for South Asia, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2001, p.45

⁴¹ Hansen, *ibid*, in: "Events, Inquiries, News, Notices, Reports", p.365

⁴² Kathryn Hansen, "Parsi Theatre, Urdu Drama, and the Communalization of Knowledge: A Bibliographical Essay", *ibid*, p.53

number and the emerging level of competitiveness encouraged the writers to urge for their rights.⁴³

One of the playwrights who appeared prominently from the Parsi Theatre was Agha Hashr Kashmiri. Born in Benaras in 1889⁴⁴, Hashr moved to Bombay and joined the Alfred Theatre Company⁴⁵ as a writer when he was barely 17 or 18 years old. Described as a firebrand orator, prolific writer, Hashr was also able to educate himself in Hindi, thus expanding his ability to write for theatre. Hashr formed his own theatre company in Hyderabad Deccan in 1910, and visited Lahore with his plays in 1913.⁴⁶ He formed another theatre company under the title Indian Shakespeare Theatrical Company in Lahore around 1912-13.⁴⁷

Hashr is also known as one of the pioneers of the New Theatre Movement in the subcontinent, which aimed towards developing and promoting new elements in theatre in contradiction to those based on ancient Sanskrit traditions. Hashr's contribution to the movement was valuable and he wrote 32 plays between 1897 and 1931. His plays among other subjects were based on social issues, and political and nationalistic aspirations.⁴⁸ Hashr is also known for his acting in silent movies between 1919 and 1923, and his interest in the genre inspired him to write scripts for movie houses that were established then, along with investing in his own film company in 1934, a year before his death in 1935.⁴⁹ Hashr's plays are considered to be a seminal part of theatrical tradition in Pakistan and have been staged by some practitioners across the years and more recently by the newly formed National Academy of Performing Arts in Karachi which performed Hashr's *Sufed Khoon* (White Blood) in 2008 as part of its repertory plays.

⁴³ Ishrat Rehmani, "Urdu Drama Nigari pur Aik Nazar", *Urdu Dramay Ki Tareekh o Tanqeed*, (Urdu), Educational Book House, Aligarh, 2001, pp.152-155

⁴⁴ Agha Hashr's birthdate is mentioned as 1876, 1879 and late 1880's in varying accounts.

⁴⁵ Saeed Malik, "Hashr: A Legendary Playwright", dated 21 Dec. 2003, www.dawn.com accessed 20 Jan. 2007

⁴⁶ Saleem Akhtar, "Urdu Drama: Tanazur" *Majmua Agha Hashr* (Urdu), Sang e Meel Publications, Lahore, 2005, p.26

⁴⁷ Rehmani, *ibid*, pp.186-187

⁴⁸ Malik, *ibid*

⁴⁹ Akhtar, *ibid*, p.26

The rise of IPTA

With the gradual influx of cinema, the Parsi theatre was waning by the 1930's. This drama, which aimed at the spectacle, became no match for motion pictures that offered much more than the theatre could offer.⁵⁰ With the diminishing of Parsi theatre companies and the introduction of radio and cinema, another development that significantly impacted theatre was the founding of the Indian People's Theatre Association, (IPTA). Founded in 1942-43, the IPTA is described as the first national level theatre movement in India, and in its initial phases, the cultural front of the Communist Party of India. IPTA's branches were spread across the subcontinent, including Karachi and Lahore ⁵¹, although they were considered less active here than in other cities of the country. The IPTA made a determined effort to challenge the contemporary commercial theatre and developed a program that would revive theatre and the traditional arts as a means to create a struggle for political, economic and social justice. In the years 1942-52, the IPTA created plays that achieved success on a national level and attracted practitioners from film, dance, music and theatre alike. The founding of the IPTA then, is described as a nationwide movement through the rejection of colonial commercial forms. IPTA's rejection of nineteenth-century theatre and the culture that sustained it is visible in the organisation's 1943 Bulletin that is critical of nineteenth-century cultural expression that sought recourse in a legendary past. The objectives of IPTA hence aimed at creating forms beyond commercial theatre and voicing struggles against imperialism and economic exploitation. Despite being in the forefront of creating an alternative serious theatre in the 1940's, the IPTA saw a rapid decline after 1947.⁵² IPTA's decline is seen in relationship to both internal and external factors. When it was launched as the cultural wing of the Communist Party, it attracted many progressive writers and intellectuals who looked at it as a forum for progressive art, rather than a mass organisation. IPTA therefore was critiqued as being an urban elite force that took theatre to the people rather than being a people's theatre. In the 1950's the Communist Party in India inclined towards a cooperation with the new national government, which however, in turn attacked IPTA programs and activists from 1948 onwards by imposing censorship, levying high

⁵⁰ Alain Desoulières, "A Study of Kamal Ahmad Rizvi's Urdu TV Drama *Alif Nun*", *Annual of Urdu Studies* Vol. 14, Centre for South Asia, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1999, p.62

⁵¹ Erven, "Of Stages and Mosques. The Irresistible Rise of Pakistan's Political Theatre", *ibid*, p.159

⁵² Aparna Bharagava Dharwadekar, *Theatres of Independence. Drama, Theory, and Urban Performance in India since 1947*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2006, pp.25-30

entertainment taxes and removing patronage of its cultural institutions. However the IPTA may be marked as a vehicle of transformation for Indian theatre in its early years and a transition between the colonial and postcolonial events in Indian theatre.⁵³

POST PARTITION

Fawzia Afzal-Khan finds the roots of Pakistani theatre in the performative traditions of the Indian subcontinent that include folk and epic forms. A diverse range of traditional forms such as the *Nautanki*, the *Kathakali* and *Tamasha* that were derived from a multi-cultural society were further informed with elements of British drama that was performed in theatre halls. These elements however did not evolve much beyond Partition, and apart from a few influences that she lists such as the Punjabi folk form *Swaang* or the Parsi theatre, Afzal Khan asserts that the theatre did not really take root in Pakistan as it did in post partition India. One of the reasons she accounts for this is the Islamist ideology of Pakistan that bears a hostile attitude to the performing arts for its capacity to question beliefs and also for the “foregrounding” of the body. She also shares the views of one of *Tehrik e Niswan*’s initial members, Writer / Director Khalid Ahmad, that the apathy towards theatre can also be attributed to the turbulent political situation in Pakistan. In a country that has been ruled to a large extent through military dictatorships, and some interludes of civilian rule, that have seen the continued existence of a feudal mindset, any cultural activity that may challenge the existing status quo is largely discouraged. An activity such as theatre that has the potential to encourage critical thinking is considered suspect and subversive by the ruling authorities. These issues are compounded by the conservative and the “anti culture” bias of the Muslim middle class in Pakistan after partition, who, in denial of any shared heritage considered all elements of Hindu culture as borrowed and therefore not Pakistani, contributed to the lack of public interest in the development of theatre in Pakistan.⁵⁴ Having said this, there is certainly evidence of a diverse range of theatre activity through the years since the country’s inception, and the following chronological account provides a survey of these activities in the political background of the country.

⁵³ *ibid*, p.36.

⁵⁴ Afzal-Khan, *ibid*, pp.1-2

Theatre after the emergence of Pakistan - Political background and Theatre 1950's-70's

For whatever little scholarship is available on the chronology of theatre in Pakistan, writers and practitioners tend to agree that political theatre did not emerge in the country until the late 70's or early 80's. Erven's account as well as Afzal-Khan's on the subject states the beginning of political theatre in the 80's with the inception of *Ajoka*, and Erven identifies the 50's and 60's as a period of little theatrical activity. For this period, he describes theatre events as occasional original or Western translated plays that were either "sub standard" or "unexciting", and not frequent enough to constitute a "genuine movement". His view is shared by Shahid Nadeem, Writer and Director *Ajoka* theatre, who considered the declaration of Martial Law in 1977 to be the motivating force for political theatre in Pakistan. Nadeem expresses the view that it was the prohibition of political activity during the Martial Law period that people sought alternative ways of expression in the form of a political theatre movement.⁵⁵

However, this view dismisses other theatre activities that are documented in accounts by Don Rubin, Jan Marek and Sigrid Kahle on the subject. Collectively, these accounts draw a picture of some theatre activity through the early decades of Pakistan's inception. There is evidence of theatre practice initiated by some practitioners right after Partition, such as Khwaja Moenuddin, whose plays on social reform commented on the new state and its social conditions. Additionally little is known about the theatre activities in East Pakistan and its Language movement in the chronicles of theatre in Pakistan. My own information on one such example stems from a paper written on a single such example by Bangladeshi Director Syed Jamil Ahmed who challenges such assertions in his work. In the section that follows I draw up a chronological account of the theatre activities that were evident in the early years after Pakistan's inception.

When Pakistan was formed in 1947, Urdu theatre had suffered a decline at the hands of the rapidly growing film industry. With the aim of providing mass entertainment taken over largely by the film genre, Urdu theatre succumbed under financial burdens it could not sustain. Theatre in Pakistan in 1947 is described by Marek as virtually non-existent, with very few

⁵⁵ Erven, *ibid*, pp.160-161

original plays that may have been staged under innumerable difficulties. Apart from there being no suitable theatre halls, necessary equipment and no state patronage, it was viewed as an exercise that was unworthy of much attention.⁵⁶

With independence in 1947, most Hindu or non-Muslim IPTA members left Karachi and Lahore marking an end of most of the serious theatre. One Muslim member Safdar Mir, left Lahore in 1945 to join the Bombay branch of IPTA. Before he returned to Pakistan in 1948, Mir speaks of many performances by him and his IPTA friends, specifically one based on the communal riots during Partition. The play was performed in slums and sidewalks of Bombay.⁵⁷ When Mir returned to Pakistan in 1948, (1951 in Erven's account) he reorganised the Drama Club at the Government College Lahore in 1951.⁵⁸ The Government College Lahore⁵⁹, established on the pattern of Oxford and Cambridge in the nineteenth century, was well known for its annual plays in and outside academia. Its plays included song and dance in the more indigenous tradition, and its repertoire included Shakespearean plays translated into Urdu, Hindi as well as Punjabi. The GCDC introduced the seriousness of the IPTA group to many young students, and some of them subsequently made significant contributions to modern theatre in Pakistan.

Rubin's and Marek's accounts lead us to the evidence of emerging theatre activities initiated by independent groups in the early years after independence. There seems little interaction between these groups, but all accounts lead us to believe that the main objective was to produce socially relevant plays that reflected on the dynamics and issues of a newly formed nation, and emphasised a spirit of national integration. A privately operated Pakistan Arts Council was created by the poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Imtiaz Ali Taj, and the painter A.R.Chughtai, for the promotion of the arts in 1948 in Lahore and it produced its first play in 1955. There is also evidence in Rubin's account of a so called "Islamic" theatre group in

⁵⁶ Jan Marek, *ibid*, p.123

⁵⁷ Erven, *ibid*

⁵⁸ Don Rubin, *The World Encyclopaedia of Contemporary Theatre*, Volume 5 - Asia Pacific, Routledge, London and New York, 2000, p.357

⁵⁹ Now known as the Government College University after it was raised to the status of a University in 2002. The Government College Drama Club (GCDC) is now titled as the GCU DC, the Government College University Dramatic Club.

Peshawar which staged productions each year on themes of significance to Islam and national pride.⁶⁰

In Karachi similar socially relevant themes were taken up in the productions of writer - director Khwaja Moenuddin who formed the Drama Guild in 1952. His plays dealt with the problems of the migrants from India and attacked the lack of any real change in the values and attitudes in the new Pakistan. A migrant from Hyderabad Deccan (now Andhra Pradesh), Moenuddin's first play in Pakistan *Zawal e Hyderabad* (The Downfall of Hyderabad) was staged in Karachi as early as 1949.⁶¹ His play *Naya Nishan* (New Mark) in 1954⁶² referred to the situation in Kashmir and was written during the negotiations between India and Pakistan about Kashmir's future.⁶³ In response to a protest raised by the Government of India against its anti Indian stance, the play was banned by the then government and was later staged in 1967 with slight modifications and under an amended title.⁶⁴ Apart from these, Moenuddin is well known for his landmark plays that made an impact on the development of theatre in early Pakistan. The 1952 play *Lal Qilay Se Lahu Khet* (From the Red Fort to the Red Field)⁶⁵ comments on the post-partition life on migrants from India who went through tremendous sufferings to make Pakistan their new home. *Mirza Ghalib Bunder Road Par* 1956, (Mirza Ghalib on the Harbour Road) reflects the tragic fate of Urdu in a multi cultural Karachi where it is transformed and no longer understood when Mirza Ghalib, the renowned classical Urdu and Persian poet of India (1796-1869) revisits the city after Partition. The play also comments on the social contradictions between spoken words and the outrages that existed in the socio political life in Pakistan.⁶⁶ Another play worth mentioning is *Taleem e Baleghaan*, (Adult Education), in which the breakdown of the social and political ideals of Pakistan are discussed through a witty repartee between a teacher and his students in an adult literacy classroom.

⁶⁰ Rubin, *ibid*

⁶¹ Anwer Enayatullah, "Khwaja Moenuddin", (Urdu), *Qandir, Drama* No. 14 -15, Vol. 4-5, Peshawar, Feb.-Mar. 1976, p.39

⁶² 1952 in Marek's account

⁶³ Rubin, *ibid*, p.358

⁶⁴ Marek, *ibid*, p.124

⁶⁵ The contrast in the two places mentioned is evident: The Red Fort of Delhi was the seat of the Mughals, and the Red Field, a still existing suburb of Karachi was an area where refugee colonies were built.

Marek, *ibid*, p.126

⁶⁶ Marek, *ibid*

In a personal account, Sigrid Kahle reminisces about her five-year stay in Karachi in the 50's and her efforts to motivate a theatre group in a city where theatrical activity lacked any institutional support. Kahle, a Norwegian, was married to a diplomat who was stationed in Karachi in the 50's. She presented this account in a conference arranged by the Academy of Letters in Islamabad in 1996. Her account describes the conditions that prevailed for theatre in Pakistan in that time. Apart from the absence of any performing spaces and technical facilities, another concern was the resistance of women to participating as performers. Kahle speaks of Moenuddin's play *Lal Qilay Se Lalu Khet* as one of her group's most successful productions, in which a recently returned graduate of the Royal College of Dramatic Arts, Zia Moheyuddin was invited to collaborate with the author and produce the play. (Zia Moheyuddin now heads the National Academy of Performing Arts in Karachi). Kahle's account gives an insightful picture of Karachi's social fabric in view of the migrant population. Indeed Moenuddin's play touched the hearts of many in Karachi because of the reality of the situation, compared to Lahore where the migrant issue was not so prevalent. The intervention of the state is evident in Kahle's account where she reveals that Moenuddin was asked to alter the ending of his play *Lal Qilay...* because of its sharp criticism. Kahle's article also offers a picture of her group's activities and working methods, showing it to be fairly energetically occupied with varied productions. Although not clearly stated, the article suggests the name of her group as Karachi Theatre, which ultimately was disbanded and repeatedly branched off into other groups like Group Theatre and the Karachi Art Theatre Society.⁶⁷

Historically speaking, the two decades of the 1950s and 1960s are significant because of important political developments; The Communist Party was banned in the early 1950's, the labour movement was initiated in the late 1950s and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was brought to power through a popular democratic movement in the 1960s.

In the early 1950's the Communist Party of Pakistan (CPP) was banned and its leadership was arrested. The left movement in Pakistan traces its origins in the Indian communist movement. The CPP joined the Pakistan Muslim League in its early years,

⁶⁷ Sigrid Kahle, "1950 Key Ashray ka Karachi Theatre", (Urdu), Ajmal Kamal (ed.) *Karachi Ki Kahani* Vol.1, Aaj ki Kitabein, Karachi, 2007, pp.397-402

supporting the bourgeoisie against the feudal lords, but was ousted by feudalist elements in the Muslim League. The CPP in turn sought drastic measures and organised the working classes for a revolution with the help of liberal elements in the bourgeoisie. Their plans for a coup (known as the Rawalpindi conspiracy case) were unearthed in 1951 and the government banned the CPP in the same year along with its student and trade union wings.⁶⁸ Since the Communists had inspired the political theatre movement in the post-partition years, the conventional view is that once the Communist Party was disbanded political theatre virtually ceased in Pakistan.

Assertions about a lack of theatre activities in this time period are challenged by Jamil Ahmed who attributes the amnesia about East Pakistan in the narratives of theatre in Pakistan as a factor towards the lack of acknowledgement of political theatre in Dhaka in 1953.⁶⁹ Perhaps this selective memory is also the reason why the little documentation on Pakistan's theatre history does not acknowledge theatre and its linkages to the Communist Party in the Eastern wing of Pakistan in the 1950's. There is no mention of the following example documented by Ahmed in any of the books or discussions on Pakistani political theatre. Ahmed makes particular reference to a play written by Munir Chawdhury and performed at the Dhaka Central Jail in 1953. Chawdhury served his first imprisonment in 1949 because of his association with the Communist Party and was also actively involved in the Language Movement that demanded for Bengali to be instituted as a state language of Pakistan. Following his release, he became associated with the University of Dhaka and was involved in acting and directing a couple of plays. He was re-arrested in 1952, and while in prison wrote a one act play *Kabar*, (The Grave), which according to Chawdhury himself, bore influences of Irwin Shaw's 1936 play *Bury the Dead*, in which six soldiers killed on the battlefield rise from the dead, refuse to be buried and claim the right to not be forgotten. The play was written upon a request of a fellow prisoner Ranesh Dasgupta, an active member of the Communist Party in Dhaka since its inception, who wanted the play to be performed by the imprisoned members of the Communist party to commemorate the student clashes with the government in 1952 which had ensued as

⁶⁸ <http://www.laborpakistan.org/leftmovement.php>, accessed 25 October 2007

⁶⁹ Syed Jamil Ahmed, "Raising the Dead in a Prison by the Light of Lanterns: An Examination of a Fragment of Political Theatre in (East) Pakistan", forthcoming, 2009

part of the Language Movement and had left many students dead. Chawdhury's play written in the winter of 1952-53 met specific demands set by Dasgupta so that it could be performed after 10pm when the lights were turned off, and performed with the aid of hurricane lanterns to be borrowed from student prisoners of the jail. The play was performed in February 1953 by Dasgupta's fellow political prisoners in the space of a cell, for a group of spectators that shared a common identity of being political prisoners of members of the Communist party. The play's narrative of the interaction between two characters, a Leader and a Police Officer in a graveyard, supervising the quick burial of innumerable people shot by violent clashes the preceding afternoon, was read, according to Ahmed, as "a voicing of demand that the aspect of the government that urgently required change was the language as its mode of communication". Ahmed's detailed analysis of the play and its context is written to dispel the notion that no political theatre took place in Pakistan before the 70's.⁷⁰

In other chronicles on the subject, there is evidence of some theatre activity that is mentioned in the background of the political developments in the following years. In 1958 a working class movement began across Pakistan. This movement, initiated in Lahore gripped the whole country. On 7 October 1958, President Iskander Mirza abrogated the 1956 Constitution, enforced Martial Law and appointed General Ayub Khan as the Chief Martial Law Administrator (CMLA). Ayub was appointed Prime Minister the same month and a new cabinet was sworn in that included Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the youngest member of this cabinet, who was assigned the Commerce portfolio.⁷¹ Some evidence of state-sponsored theatre is found for this period in Marek's research, when by 1962, the state began formulating ideas for a national theatre, and the Pakistan Council for National Integration was established in 1963, with a view to strengthen the unity among the diverse population. One of the early plays written in 1965 (author unknown) entitled *Rishta* was staged in Karachi and reflected a theme of unifying the Muslims of East and West Pakistan.⁷²

⁷⁰ Syed Jamil Ahmed, *ibid.*

⁷¹ Stanley Wolpert, *Zulfi Bhutto of Pakistan. His Life and Times*, Oxford University Press, New York, Oxford, 1993, pp.57-58

⁷² Marek, *ibid.*, p.123

In 1967, The Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) was formed on September 1 with a radical socialist programme. A communist leader, J.A Rahim, had written its basic manifesto and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (who was later the foreign minister in Ayub Khan's cabinet) appeared in political arena as a challenge to the Ayub dictatorship, representing the masses' feelings. Bhutto raised the slogan of socialism and joined hands with some leftists to form the PPP. When the Ayub dictatorship started targeting Bhutto, he became a symbol of resistance, strengthening his popularity and his grip on the party. 1968-69 saw revolutionary movements carried out by workers and students as a direct result of the growing gap between the rich and the poor. This revolutionary movement helped in increasing the popularity of the PPP.⁷³

In 1969, Ayub Khan stepped down and abrogated the Constitution, transferring power to General Yahya Khan. Yahya Khan imposed Martial Law, and assumed the mantle of supreme command of the armed forces as well as the rest of the country. The constitution was suspended, political activities (but not political parties) were banned, the National and provincial assemblies along with central and provincial cabinets stood dissolved. Yahya also announced elections for the forthcoming year, but in the campaigning that ensued, it was clear that the eastern and western wings of Pakistan were in clear conflict.⁷⁴

This conflict was evident from the inception of Pakistan, as Ahmed asserts that from very early on, it was clear that West Pakistan was being industrialised fast while East Pakistan was being turned into a supplier of raw materials and consumer of finished goods. With the first decade being burdened with political instability and poor leadership, events led to the domination of the West over the East. "Resentment was on the rise among the Bengalis and soon a crisis precipitated over the question of state language. As events further developed, the language movement proved to be the corner stone of Bengali nationalism around which evolved the politics of the eastern wing of Pakistan. Gradually, the political and social reality of Pakistan polarised into two distinctly opposing streams: (i) the language-based nationalism which

⁷³ <http://www.laborpakistan.org/leftmovement.php>, accessed 25 October 2007

⁷⁴ <http://pakistanspace.tripod.com/51.htm>, accessed 25 October 2007

projected a national identity around Bengal language and (ii) religion-based nationalism which saw the religion of Islam as the rallying point.”⁷⁵

With the build up of this estrangement that ultimately led to the separation of the eastern wing and the creation of Bangladesh in 1971, Yahya Khan transferred power to Bhutto who assumed charge as not just the president, but also the Chief Martial Law Administrator as well as commander of the armed forces.⁷⁶

The period towards a popular movement for democracy in the late 60's, and the later ousting of General Yahya Khan and his replacement by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in 1971, saw the creation of a number of plays that were motivated by political causes. A leftist leader Major Ishaq Mohammed wrote *Mussali* (Sweeper) in Punjabi. This play, performed in lower class neighbourhoods and villages in Punjab, included several performances by the sweepers themselves and its political stance is described by Erven as a fine example of “theatre of liberation” in Pakistan, a term Erven coins for political theatre in Asia in his book *The Playful Revolution*.⁷⁷ Another writer, Sarmad Sehbai wrote the first original Punjabi play at the Government College in Lahore in 1971, *Tu Kaun, Mein Kaun*, (Who Are You, Who Am I?), followed by other successes such as *The Dark Room* (1971) and *Phandey* (Noose, 1972), all of which were acknowledged as works that were firmly rooted in social realities.⁷⁸ However, as Erven states, Sehbai's and Ishaq's contributions remained incidental because they had “no production outlet in the form of a competent theatre company”. Additionally he quotes Shahid Nadeem (*Ajoka* theatre) who considered Sehbai's *Dark Room* and his own play *Mara Hoya Kutta* (The Dead Dog, approximately 1970) as scattered events in the midst of high political activity that was already providing the “necessary outlets for people's desire for social change.”⁷⁹

The decades of the 1950s-1970s also saw the growth of the labour movement in Pakistan. Mentioned here in the light of the political background of Pakistan discussed earlier, a

⁷⁵ Syed Jamil Ahmed, forthcoming, *ibid*

⁷⁶ <http://pakistanspace.tripod.com/51.htm>, accessed 25 October 2007

⁷⁷ Erven, *ibid*, p. 160-161

⁷⁸ <http://docs.google.com/gview?a=v&q=cache:ey6Yabt5DLIJ:www.asghost.co.uk/contexttheatre/pages/indev/SarmadSehbai.pdf+Dark+room+sarmad+sehbai&hl=en&gl=uk>, accessed 16 August 2009

⁷⁹ Erven, *ibid*, p.161

brief background to the movement is important to understand the alliances that theatre groups like *Tehrik e Niswan* and *Ajoka* had with political activism of this nature in their initial years.

The labour struggle was evident most in Karachi, a major beneficiary of Pakistan's industrialisation programme, and a city that grew at a phenomenal rate between 1947 and 1972, with a 217% increase in its population. State sponsored repressive measures of keeping wages low and suppressing the working class saw an increase in worker unrest. In 1951, despite the government's ratification of the International Labour Organisation convention that guaranteed higher wages and workers' right to organise, the living conditions of the workers did not improve. The new state subordinated labour organisations by sponsoring anti-communist trade unions, banned leftist and popular trade unions and passed draconian labour laws that prevented the right to strike. In 1958, when General Ayub Khan took over as the Chief Martial Law Administrator (CMLA), the workers' repression was intensified. During Ayub Khan's rule (1958-69), bureaucrats and former army officers ran the major industrial units and the era saw an unprecedented growth in the wealth and holdings of Pakistan's major industrial houses. At the same time the regime repealed the Industrial Disputes Act, of 1947, under which most labour laws had been functioning, and re enacted it as the Industrial Disputes Ordinance, under which strikes and the formation of unions were prohibited.⁸⁰ The repressive measures saw the workers become more militant in their response. In 1968, outraged over Ayub Khan's celebrations of a "decade of development", the factory workers initiated a movement that forced the military to hold what would be the country's first general elections. Before the promised elections, the military government amended laws significantly for workers and students, who were the base of the movement against the military in 1968-69. This revolutionary movement also helped in increasing the popularity of Bhutto's Pakistan Peoples' Party (PPP). The military government had promulgated the Industrial Relations Ordinance (IRO), which in principle recognised the right to form unions. Under the IRO, the number of unions and their memberships grew in the initial years of the pro-worker government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto who

⁸⁰ Kamran Asdar Ali, "The Strength of the Street Meets the Strength of the State: The 1972 Labour Struggle in Karachi", *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 37, Cambridge University Press, 2005, pp.83-86

assumed charge soon after the separation of Pakistan's eastern wing and the creation of Bangladesh.⁸¹

Through the early years of the Bhutto government, there was a great deal of anti-industrialist rhetoric by the state and Bhutto's political party (PPP), which assured the industrial workers of its support. During the election campaign, Bhutto had promised to reinstate the workers who had been dismissed by mill owners in the past several years. The anti capitalist rhetoric of the government-controlled media in the initial period of Bhutto's rule raised the confidence of the workers that Bhutto was on their side. Labourers and working class leaders intensified their struggle for the reinstatement of those retrenched during the martial law years and demanded pay backs through demonstrations that supported colleagues working in different mills. The government responded to this growing militancy by taking a firmer stand on the labour issue. Bhutto and his ministers raised the idea of a "foreign hand" behind these unrests that was working towards the destabilising of the government. In 1974 Bhutto warned the workers that if they did not end their protests, "the strength of the street would be met by the strength of the state". While some left leaning labour friendly ministers and officers of the PPP made periodical pro labour announcements seeking to work towards a compromise between the state and the striking labour unions, it had become clear to many in the labour movement that the government in spite of its pro labour rhetoric was seeking to assert itself and would ultimately crack down upon the workers.⁸² In 1975 Bhutto amended the IRO to stem the proliferation of unions. When in 1977 Bhutto was replaced by a military coup led by General Zia ul Haque, union leaders were imprisoned, and unions were suppressed during the eleven years of his rule.⁸³

Professor and Academic Christopher Candland, whose research focuses on the politics of labour, education, and health in South and Southeast Asia, attributes the government opposition to workers' movements and organisations as the biggest obstacle to workers' organisation in Pakistan. Lacking institutions other than those inherited from the colonial era,

⁸¹ Christopher Candland, "Workers' Organisations in Pakistan. Why No Role in Formal Politics?", *Critical Asian Studies*, Vol.39:1, Routledge, 2007, p.41

⁸² Asdar Ali, *ibid*, pp.89-91

⁸³ Candland, *ibid*, pp.41-50

which were designed to harness a population, the military and the bureaucracy opted for a centralised approach to governance. This, coupled by the government's joining of SEATO, a US backed military alliance that regarded worker activists and worker organisations as subversive, and the involvement of organisations such as the pro-United States International Confederation of Free Trade Unions strengthened the state's efforts to depoliticise the labour movement. Despite repression, unions have been a major social force for the democracy and civilian rule. Various forces that have undermined the growth and opportunities for the workers are broadly placed by Candland under categories such as displacement during Partition, colonial institutions of the government, anti communist alliances and neoclassical economic ideologies. All of these emit from a single source; a repressive ruling class preoccupied with its own preservation.⁸⁴

At the time when Martial Law was enforced by General Zia ul Haque in 1977, two kinds of public / institutional theatre existed in Karachi; the commercial slapstick comedy, and the elite theatre that catered to an upper middle class audience.⁸⁵ The commercial theatre, which was very popular in Karachi in the late 1970's, comprised mostly of stand up comedy and gained recognition for its practitioners until it gradually fizzled out as it became less financially viable for its practitioners. While in its heyday, the venues for these performances were owned by the producers or directors. The commercial viability of selling the venues for the construction of shopping malls, and ultimately the shifting of some of its more popular artists to Lahore where commercial theatre was still thriving, gradually led to the waning of this theatre form.⁸⁶ Lahore however remains a large centre for commercial theatre, drawing audiences in large numbers. With its reliance on sexual innuendos and witty repartee, this form of theatre has managed to gain a faithful audience that is able to attend shows on a regular basis. This contemporary commercial theatre is described as an outgrowth of the folk theatre which was very popular in the Punjab in the 40's and 50's and comprised of touring companies that mostly originated in Lahore.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Candland, *ibid*, pp.42-55

⁸⁵ Imran Shirvanee, "The Emergence of the Third Force", *The News International*, Karachi, July 22, 1994

⁸⁶ Hasan Mansoor, "Theatre in Karachi in the Doldrums", dated 18 February 2007, <http://www.dawn.com/2007/02/18/local5.htm> accessed 31 May 2009

⁸⁷ Fawzia Afzal-Khan, *ibid*, pp.3-4

Amongst the theatre that catered to the upper middle class in Karachi was the group the *Theatre Walley*, (Of the Theatre). The group was not politically motivated. The company comprised of well-known television artists and its plays were mostly adaptations of West End and Broadway successes.⁸⁸ Parallel to this existed a socially conscious theatre headed by Ali Ahmed, whose group NATAK (National Academy of Theatrical Arts Karachi), (translated as “play”), was partially funded by the Bhutto regime. Ali Ahmed is also one of the personalities who came to Pakistan from the IPTA tradition and his political theatre stemmed from his Marxist ideology. His productions included adaptations of Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, Camus’ *Caligula* and Moliere’s *Bourgeois Gentleman*.⁸⁹ Ahmed’s company can be credited for its survival for at least 10 years in a time when most actors worked voluntarily with little or no monetary interest.⁹⁰ With its leftist inclinations, Ali Ahmed’s theatre group was an inspiration for young practitioners like *Tehrik e Niswan* founder Sheema Kermani who recalls watching his anti establishment agit prop plays at political conferences and public halls in Karachi in the 70’s. With the establishment of *Tehrik e Niswan*, Kermani acknowledges the assistance of Ali Ahmed in training her group for an early production.⁹¹ With the fall of Bhutto’s regime, and the group’s patronage and support removed, it gradually disintegrated.

In the wake of this polarisation between the slapstick theatre and the anglicised elite theatre, another tradition of theatre emerged in the 80s, established by people who were political agitators, largely campaigning against the military rule of Zia ul Haque and the laws enforced by him.

Laws introduced by Zia ul Haque

A brief overview of the laws introduced by Zia ul Haque reflects his determination to enforce Islamic laws that would ensure the establishment of an Islamic society. On July 5, 1977, in his first address to the nation, he declared this enforcement. The Government of Zia-ul-Haq took a number of steps to eradicate non-Islamic practices from the country. He introduced the *Zakat* and *Ushr* Ordinances to Islamize the economic system on June 20, 1980. A Federal *Shariah*

⁸⁸ Rubin, *ibid*, p.358

⁸⁹ Erven, *ibid*, p.159

⁹⁰ Interview, Khalid Ahmad, *Tehrik e Niswan*, 18 October 2006

⁹¹ Interview by telephone, Sheema Kermani, 29 June 2009

Court was established to decide cases according to the teachings of the Holy Quran. Appeals against the Lower and High Courts were to be presented before the *Shariah* Court for hearing. Blasphemy of the Holy Prophet (P.B.U.H) would now be punishable by death instead of life imprisonment.

Zia-ul-Haq selected an Islamic Parliament called the *Majlis-i-Shoora* in 1980. This was to act as the Parliament of Pakistan in place of the National Assembly. Most of the members of the *Shoora* were intellectuals, scholars, ulema, journalists, economists and professionals belonging to different fields of life. The *Shoora* was to act as a board of advisors for the President.

A number of other Islamization programs were carried out including the teaching of Islamic Studies and Arabic, which were made compulsory. Pakistan Studies and Islamic Studies were made compulsorily for several degree programmes. For professional studies, extra marks were given to people who were *Hafiz-e-Quran* (those who can memorise the entire text of the Holy Quran).

The media was also affected by these measures. Television especially was brought under the Islamization campaign, news in Arabic were to be read on both television and radio, female anchor persons were required to cover their heads, and the *Azan* (call for prayer) was relayed regularly on radio and television to announce time for prayers.

Zia's Government introduced the Hudood Ordinance for the first time in Pakistan, which meant that punishments were ordained by the Holy Quran on theft, adultery and the use of liquor. Under this Ordinance, a culprit could be sentenced to lashing, life imprisonment and in some cases, death by stoning.

The Islamic laws of Zia also included laws for women. Thus, for the first time, a woman could be flogged for adultery. If a rape was reported, four witnesses were to be provided otherwise, legally, the rape could be termed adultery. Another law, The Law of Evidence, under the *Shariah* laws proposed that the testimony of a woman was not equal to that of a man. In

legal matters, two women would have to stand witness against the testimony of one man. The status of women was thus arbitrarily cut in half by Zia.⁹²

The Women's Movement

When General Ayub Khan imposed martial law in 1958, he made changes in the Islamic Personal Law by promulgating a Muslim Family Laws Ordinance, which gave women rights within a liberal interpretation of Islam. Bhutto's rule further strengthened the position of women with his progressive laws in terms of women's rights. The 1977 Martial Law of General Zia ul Haque and the imposition of the Islamisation process that largely targeted women became a turning point for the country. The Hudood Ordinance which specifies Islamic punishments was passed in 1979. Under this law, no distinction was made between rape, adultery and fornication. When in 1981, a woman and a man were arrested for adultery and sentenced to a hundred lashes and stoning to death, this galvanised women to come together and form the Women's Action Forum (WAF), an alliance of several women's groups and individuals, that served as a platform for these groups to take joint action against Zia's anti women laws. The women's movement did not confine itself to just these issues. Women also emerged at the forefront of the Movement for the Restoration of Democracy (MRD), as leaders of the peace movement between India and Pakistan, within trade unions, as journalists and editors of major newspapers and journals. In 1983, the first demonstration against Martial Law and Islamisation was held by women in which they protested against the proposed Law of Evidence that equated the evidence of two women with that of one man.⁹³

The final version of the Law of Evidence restricted the testimony of two women against that of one man, to financial cases only. In other instances, the testimony of a single woman was left to the discretion of the judge. WAF members saw this as a constraining of women's economic participation in the society. In 1986, WAF members initiated a debate over the passage of the Shariat Bill and the Ninth Amendment that ordained that all laws in Pakistan be established in conformity with Islamic Law. Opponents to the Bill were of the view that these

⁹² www.storyofpakistan.com, accessed 19 June 2006

⁹³ Nighat Said Khan, "Up Against the State: The Women's Movement in Pakistan – Implications for the Global Women's Movement", Dame Barrow Lecture, Toronto, 1999, pp.3-4, <http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/cwse/Nighat%20Lecture%203.pdf>, accessed 19 July 2009

laws had the potential of withdrawing many of the rights that women in Pakistan had earned. In 1991 a compromised version of the Shariat Bill was promulgated. Since the late 1980's many women's groups began to expand their scope. Social welfare activities emerged as women began to set up small-scale projects across the country that focussed on the empowerment of women. NGOs were set up, legal aid centres established, all focussing on fighting for women's rights in education institutions, the workplace and the home.⁹⁴ It is within this women's movement that various organisations actively supported the WAF. Activists like Kermani and *Ajoka's* Madeeha Gauhar shared their voice of protest through theatre on this platform as well. Kermani's *Tehrik e Niswan* was already an established women's group in 1979, (discussed in chapter 3), before the foundation of the WAF and she recalls that like-minded groups such as the *Shirkat Gah* in Lahore and individual women affiliated to the Karachi University joined the WAF in solidarity to the cause.⁹⁵

Emergence of political theatre during Zia ul Haque's regime

Shahid Nadeem of *Ajoka* Theatre succinctly explains the beginnings of what he calls the "political theatre movement" in Pakistan. In the time that Zulfikar Ali Bhutto had emerged as a leader, political activity was high. He describes it as a hopeful period when agitations, demonstrations and party politics were considered the tools for social change. The sporadic political plays at the time were simply scattered activities. However when Martial Law was declared by Zia in 1977, political leaders were arrested, and no political activity allowed, the people realised that they had to seek alternative forms of expression. Hence Nadeem describes the political theatre movement to be an "alternative medium of political expression".⁹⁶

Theatre group DASTAK

Amongst the political agitators who challenged the state of affairs promulgated by Zia's laws, was a theatre group called *DASTAK*, formed in Karachi in 1982, and at its forefront were people like Aslam Azhar and Mansoor Saeed, who believed that theatre as a medium had the potential to reach out to the common man. This was also the time when *Tehrik e Niswan* (1980) and

⁹⁴ Anita M. Weiss, "Women, Civil Society and Politics in Pakistan", *Citizenship Studies*, Vol.3:1, Routledge, 1999, pp.142-144

⁹⁵ Interview Sheema Kermani, 20 July 2009

⁹⁶ Erven, *ibid*, p.161

Ajoka Theatre (1983) were established. Another group established by Ali Ahmed's contemporary Ismail Yousuf, shared similar objectives.

DASTAK was one of the groups that proved to be the turning point in Karachi's theatre history. Due to its political background, *DASTAK* attracted many political activists, and its low priced tickets made it accessible to many political workers. Established by Mansoor Saeed, Kamran Asdar and Aslam Azhar, the group's first production was an adaptation of Brecht's "*The Exception and the Rule*". In a span of eight years, *DASTAK* was able to generate a body of work that ranged from ambitious proscenium productions like *Galileo*, to political street theatre in various areas of Karachi. Its membership of 50 to 60 people outnumbered that of other theatre groups Karachi had seen, and the group met regularly to discuss scripts, working methodology, and rehearsals. Saeed adapted most of their plays from Brecht's works, and often the group borrowed scripts from Safdar Hashmi's⁹⁷ repertoire in India.⁹⁸

The driving force behind *DASTAK* was Aslam Azhar who had a history of working as a programme director for Pakistan Television. When he returned to Pakistan in the early 60's after his education at Cambridge, he immediately became involved in theatre. He was fired in 1976 from his television job by the Bhutto government for his progressive ideas. Azhar's admiration for Brecht resulted in several adaptations for *DASTAK*. The adaptations served also to make up for the lack of original theatre playwrights in Pakistan, a phenomenon that Azhar blamed on a lack of theatre tradition in Pakistan. In his words, serious playwrights had turned to writing for television in the language of theatre, but since they were working for a state controlled medium, their work reflected compromises, hence discouraging *DASTAK* to approach them for original works.⁹⁹ However a contrary point of view is discussed by Khalid Ahmad, co founder of *Tehrik e Niswan* in his recollections of *DASTAK*'s mode of working. According to Ahmad, Aslam Azhar was in fact not partial to adaptations and preferred to do a direct translation of western plays, with the result that names, settings, costumes were preserved in their original form and it was only the language that was changed to Urdu. While such an approach in Ahmad's opinion was

⁹⁷ Safdar Hashmi was the founder of one of India's foremost theatre of liberation companies, *Jan Natya Manch*. He was killed in 1988 during a performance in an industrial town east of Delhi.

⁹⁸ Interview, Mansoor Saeed, *DASTAK* theatre, Karachi 05 August 2006

⁹⁹ Erven, *ibid*, pp.162-163

not entirely effective, the plays were immensely political in content and presented during Zia ul Haque's time when the audience was very receptive to such content in the plays. In this way *DASTAK* differed from Ali Ahmed's NATAK in which plays were either adapted from western scripts and infused with local meaning, or written as original scripts by Ahmed himself.¹⁰⁰

DASTAK often used abandoned cinema houses of Karachi as performance spaces for its proscenium plays. Its street theatre activities were in conjunction with political activities and affiliations the group bore with political activists and trade union groups. The group performed in areas upon invitations of such parties and apart from one or two performances, did not perform street theatre unannounced. Their subjects were pertinent to the politically charged atmosphere of the time, and bore relevance to their leftist ideology. Initial funding came from personal resources of the members, but as the group became more established, it found the support of individual sponsors as well as organisations like the Goethe Institute.¹⁰¹ Given that *DASTAK* had forged links with the trade unions, the group was regularly invited to perform at events organised by them such as Labour Day celebrations or the National Trade Union Congress in 1988. In fact *DASTAK*'s first performance of Brecht's *Saint Joan of the Stockyards* was held on 1 May 1986, with three performances at different locations in the city in one day, each for an audience of about 3000 industrial workers. *DASTAK*'s members comprised of factory workers, university students and office workers.¹⁰²

The mid 1980's also saw the political unrest in Karachi that emerged as a result of the emergence of the *Mohajir Qaumi Movement* (The Migrant National Movement) (MQM), a political party representing the migrant community from India that had largely settled in Karachi. The MQM's presence was supported largely by Zia ul Haque and the army intelligence in order to counterweight the power of Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party in Sindh. Soon growing into a powerful organisation which represented the under privileged migrant community in Karachi and Hyderabad, the MQM used tactics that instilled fear in the hearts of its opponents. The "reign of terror", as described by journalist Ayaz Amir, was more sinister than the terror

¹⁰⁰ Interview, Khalid Ahmad, co founder *Tehrik e Niswan*, 22 January 2008

¹⁰¹ Interview, Mansoor Saeed, *ibid*

¹⁰² Erven, *ibid*, pp.163-164

generated by previous Martial Law regimes. Armed gangs collected protection money, dissidents feared for their lives and newspapers succumbed to the prevailing circumstances. This terror prevailed in Karachi from 1990 when Nawaz Sharif became Prime Minister, to 1995, when Benazir Bhutto's interior minister Naseerullah Babur finally launched a vicious crackdown against the MQM.¹⁰³ The terror and strife that prevailed in the city then brought down audience numbers considerably as people found it difficult to venture from their homes in the evenings. This, along with the silent retreat of the progressive intelligentsia that formed the backbone of *DASTAK*'s support system, and the emigration of some active members in pursuit of their careers, gradually led to the disbanding of the group by 1990.¹⁰⁴

Emergence of *Tehrik e Niswan* and *Ajoka Theatre*

Zia ul Haque's Martial Law era created the conditions for dissent through theatre, and it was through cultural activism that the two theatre groups the *Tehrik e Niswan* and the *Ajoka Theatre* emerged in the 1980's at the forefront of the struggle. Their work, which stemmed from their politically motivated ideology, created a lasting impact, and the two groups remain the most time enduring theatre groups in the country to date. The traditions that these groups embraced in the years before they emerged ranged broadly speaking from traditional forms drawn from indigenous culture and from theatre encompassing social issues and themes of national unity, to western realism, and ultimately the Brechtian tradition adapted by leftist theatre.

Before introducing the two theatre groups, I turn the discussion to the notion of political theatre as discussed by Baz Kershaw in his analysis of the alternative theatre movement in Britain in the 1970s, in order to draw links between their characteristics and those that were evident in *Tehrik e Niswan*'s and *Ajoka*'s ideologies. I also discuss the idea of political theatre as discussed by Brecht because of the strong influences of his theories and techniques upon the work of both these theatre groups.

¹⁰³ Ayaz Amir, "A love-hate relationship", www.dawn.com, article dated 12 November 2004, accessed 29 January 2007

¹⁰⁴ Interview, Mansoor Saeed, *ibid*

CHAPTER 2

Theatre as a Political Form

In his analysis of alternative theatre in Britain in the 70's Kershaw asserts that efficacy emanates from theatre's relationship with the wider social order and the theatre groups he studied used the nature of the audience and community as a starting point to shape a performance. Brecht's plays aimed to appeal to the audience's reason rather than feelings, and aimed to alter the passive consumerist role of the audience to an active state. By removing the illusionist realities from the plays, Brecht's work critically examined the traditional theatre of its time through what he called the "epic theatre" and "learning plays".

In discussing Kershaw I aim to draw parallels with the practices of theatre groups that I discuss later in this dissertation, with a view to examine methods that are either integrated into or neglected in their work. As Kershaw traces the history of political or alternative theatre in Britain, I find connections in his arguments that validate the emergence of the British groups and those that motivated *Tehrik e Niswan* and *Ajoka*. As ideology and community formed the basis of measuring efficacy in the British theatre groups, similarly, a shared ideology of struggle against the repressive Martial Law regime in the late 70's spurred both *Tehrik e Niswan* and *Ajoka* into action. As communities that shared interests in the struggle became their audience, the two groups emerged as powerful voices against the dictatorship of General Zia ul Haque.

I further the discussion by Kershaw's examination of the radical in performance where he suggests how radical performance may in fact replace political theatre. I look at Kershaw's identification of the commoditisation of theatre and his argument that questions the notion of political theatre in the wake of post modernism. In a globalised and mediatised world, theatre has swiftly transformed into a commodity and become part of the dominant mainstream. This is further reflected upon in Igor Kopytoff's discussion on the processes of commodification and decommodification, and the effects of capitalism under which artefacts and cultural productions that serve as instruments of critique are transformed into commodities. In discussing these processes, I make connections with similar effects of commodification that theatre in Pakistan has seen whereby the previously political theatre has joined the dominant mainstream and theatre for development has become a viable income-generating tool for both theatre groups and their funding agencies and NGOs. Kershaw argues for the radical in performance which is beyond the mainstream and in discussing this I make connections for a similar need to identify new means of reinventing theatre and inculcating a fresh cultural space that is beyond the depoliticised and commoditised trends in theatre in Pakistan.

Theatre as a Political Forum

Measuring the efficacy of theatrical performance

In a paper that analyses the nature of political theatre, Michael Kirby distinguishes political theatre from other kinds of theatre as a performance that is intentionally concerned with government and consciously engaged in politics. This intentionality then becomes a defining factor, and if a performance aims to be political but the intent is not perceived, it cannot be categorised as political theatre. Kirby does point out however that certain governments or situations such as the imposition of censorship can force all theatre to become political. Describing political theatre as intellectual because it allows spectators to read the work according to their own perceptions or belief systems, Kirby identifies it also as literary not simply because of its text, but also because all performances reinforce symbolic meaning and are read by the spectators.¹⁰⁵

Baz Kershaw employs the word efficacy to imply the potential of immediate effects in a performance (such as laughter, tears, applause) that influence the development of wider social and political realities. While it is virtually impossible to measure the socio political efficacy of a performance, Kershaw stresses that such efficacy is in fact the fundamental purpose of a performance. Hence according to him, any useful discussion on the efficacy of performance may not emanate from the nature of theatre itself, but rather theatre's relationship with the wider social order.¹⁰⁶

In tracing the alternate theatre movement in the 70's and early 80's in Britain, Kershaw finds theatre groups under this movement to share a common idealism, which later was altered by the need to survive economically, resulting in some groups simply reinforcing the status quo, while some still projecting in their work radical critiques of social and political policies. The unifying factor in the companies that Kershaw uses in his study found common ground in their combination of entertainment with debate, discussion and socio political recommendations. These groups presented theatre of social engagement that was committed to bringing about

¹⁰⁵ Michael Kirby, "On Political Theatre", *The Drama Review TDR*, Vol.19, No.2, Political Theatre Issue, MIT Press, June 1975, pp.129-130

¹⁰⁶ Kershaw, *ibid*, pp.1-2

change in specific communities. This theatre, which combined art with action, used the nature of the audience and the community as its starting point, so that the culture of the audience community shaped the aesthetics of the performances.

If theatre for specifically defined audiences is to be studied for its potential efficacy, Kershaw asserts that it is imperative to study the context of the audience and understand how specific audiences will read certain performances. It follows that performances must therefore be read as a cultural construct and in view of their full cultural background.

In exploring the potential efficacy of alternative theatre, Kershaw bases his central argument around the fact that a performance is an *ideological transaction* between performers and the community of their audience. Ideology here refers to the collective ability of the performers and audience to make common sense of the signs used in a performance, allowing the aims and intentions of the theatre company to connect with the interpretations of the audience. It is the ideology that provides a framework within which the performers encode and the audience decodes the signifiers of the performance. And so, a spectator is constantly engaged in constructing meaning in a performance as it proceeds.

Further elaborating on the concept of ideology, Kershaw takes a position that includes both neo Marxist as well as postmodernist definitions of ideology. Describing ideology as a shared system of values that allows people to bind together in communities or societies, Kershaw defines the notion of ideology through the Marxist interpretation that broadly describes it as a set of ideas that express the interests of the dominant class of a society. Marxist theorists argue that in any given society a single social order encompasses many class differences. Such an order is run by a ruling class and it is the function of cultural production to reinforce the dominant ideology and structures of power. While the subordinate groups accept this ideology through hegemony, the majority group also unconsciously participates in its own subordination because hegemony reinforces the dominant form of consciousness. In this way, hegemony ensures that the dominant ideologies remain unchallenged. In contrast to this, the post modernists argue that there is more than one culture or ideology within a society. This

multiplicity creates a constant conflict of orders within a society that prevents the existence of a dominant ideology. In examining the nature of alternative theatre in Britain, Kershaw uses both these theories as a background to his concepts, explaining that in British society the concept of a dominant ideology is too great to be ignored, and yet it is too complex to allow a monolithic control in every aspect of its culture. Within a dominant ideology, other subordinate or oppositional ideologies may struggle for cultural space and even manage to modify the dominant ideology. Theatre and performance may be prominent means of reinforcing or uncovering the hegemony and according to Kershaw, British alternative theatre followed the latter path, offering a significant challenge to the status quo.¹⁰⁷

Kershaw uses three concepts – *performance*, *community* and *culture* as a means to understand the function and full potential of theatre as a forum for the collective exploration of ideological meaning. The concept of *performance* incorporates all elements of theatre and may be employed as an essential starting point to theorise theatre's ideological functions. The notion of *community* is important to study how differently constituted audiences will affect the ideological impact of a performance. The idea of *culture* is important because theatre is a form of cultural production and culture is an essential component in understanding how a performance may affect the wider social and political arena.¹⁰⁸

Richard Schechner's description of performance incorporates all the events that take place between the performers and audience from the time the first spectator arrives at the performance to the time when the last one leaves. This is extended by Kershaw to include all the activities that relate to performance events, such as the preparation and the aftermath of a production. This he believes contributes to the potential efficacy of the performance itself, further suggesting that in order to measure the potential efficacy of community theatre performances, it would be necessary to take into account all aspects related to the event which bear on the ideological transaction between a theatre company and the community of the audience. Two theories around reception are elaborated upon by Kershaw to further understand measures of efficacy. One theory is put forth by anthropologist Victor Turner who

¹⁰⁷ Kershaw, *ibid*, pp.18-21

¹⁰⁸ Kershaw, *ibid*, pp.16-17

suggests that the audience plays a liminal role in a performance, allowing itself to accept the events in a production as both real and unreal. This, described as a ludic role, (frame of mind) allows a spectator to play around with the norms and customs presented in a performance that rule his / her life, without really having a necessary consequence on him. However this acceptability is what is needed as the first stage for performance efficacy. The second theory Kershaw expounds upon is that put forth by Elizabeth Burns, who suggests that in a performance, interaction takes place on two levels. The first, between the audience and spectators, and the other between the characters in a play. Burns suggests that two different types of conventions govern the audience's reading of performance. The first, termed by Burns as "rhetorical conventions" implies that in the interaction between actors and spectators there is an implicit agreement that whatever the actors present on stage is part of a fictitious world and allows the spectators to accept the characters and situations on stage as short lived and bound to the stage. The second, termed "authenticating conventions" suggests modes of speech and action that are part of the play and are drawn from external codes of value and norms of conduct, creating a connection to the human world of which theatre is only a part, and thereby authenticating the play. These authenticating conventions are essential for the audiences' decoding of an event and connecting the fictionality of the play to the reality of its own experiences outside theatre.¹⁰⁹

This relationship between the real and unreal aspects of a performance also enables us to understand the efficacy of a performance in the event a crisis is provoked by it. An immediate example can be drawn from *Ajoka* theatre's recent play *Burqavaganza* (2007), (the title perhaps suggesting the extravagance of the world of the *Burqa* or veil), which is a pastiche of skits, songs and comical exploration of the *Burqa*, worn by a large section of conservative Pakistanis in various forms across the country. *Ajoka* describes the play as one that "challenge(s) [...] mindsets, provoke(s) the audience to rethink and break the chains of prejudice and outdated values".¹¹⁰ While *Ajoka* mocks the underlying patriarchal values of imposing the conventions of the veil upon a society in an ever increasing intolerant environment in Pakistan, it draws its authenticating conventions from rituals and norms that are everyday practice for a large section

¹⁰⁹ Kershaw, *ibid*, pp.22-26

¹¹⁰ <http://www.Ajoka.org.pk/Ajoka/Burqa.asp>, accessed 10 May 2009

of the society (for instance a skit that uses a religious meeting for women as its premise and satirises a well known female religious speaker). This play drew strong reactions from the conservative sections of society, (interestingly, many reacted to the knowledge about the content of the play without actually seeing it) including some members of the National Assembly who found the play to be “un Islamic” and classified it as blasphemous.¹¹¹ The play was threatened to be banned but since there was no official decree on this, it has been performed in Karachi since and was performed in Lahore in August 2009 in a Theatre For Peace festival. While Director Shahid Nadeem’s intention to create a comment on “...our obsession with covering women’s face and also covering true intentions and covering vested interests with religious or political protestations....(the) play aims to poke fun at the same...(and uses the) ‘Burqa’ as a metaphor to comment on our society”¹¹² may seem valid enough, the linear and comical interpretation of a much layered code of conduct has reduced the play’s own vision to a simplistic and narrow approach. Interestingly, the outrage the play has provoked is a clear example of the effects of the crisis of authenticating conventions because they engaged with the fundamental values of the audience.

Such ruptures, according to Kershaw are an example of a breakdown of the *duality of conventions* that are necessary for a performance to play with an audience’s fundamental beliefs and provoke a crisis without actually producing immediate rejection. And it is the ludic nature of the audience that allows it to engage with ideological difference, allows rules to be kept through rhetorical conventions and allows rules to be broken through authenticating conventions. According to Turner, this paradox of rule breaking within rule keeping is crucial to the efficacy of a performance, because it is when this paradox is at its height, when a riot (or reaction) can break but does not, that performance achieves its greatest potential for long term efficacy. This is because the possible world encountered on stage is carried back by the audience to the real world and may influence subsequent action. But if a crisis is provoked to induce an alteration in the audience’s ideology, the interaction between the spectators and actors may not lead to immediate efforts to influence the socio political order. In other words, a

¹¹¹ <http://pakistaniat.com/2007/05/24/pakistan-Burqavaganza-drama-ban-Burqa-culture-Ajoka-theatre-theater/>, accessed 10 May 2009

¹¹² http://www.thaindian.com/newsportal/india-news/banned-pak-play-staged-in-delhi_10012739.html, accessed 10 May 2009

riotous reaction to a performance may allow for a seemingly immediate response but does not create the same long-term effect that a performance may have on the audience if a crisis is *not* provoked and the audience can reflect and carry back to the real world the possible world encountered on stage. Therefore theatre which mounts a radical attack on the status quo can be quite deceptive, and less effective. Kershaw also emphasises that it is the choice of audience members that makes a performance efficacious. It is the ludic role of the spectator that allows for him to either treat the performance as one that bears some consequence to his life or not that lends the performance any level of efficacy. The spectator may believe that the performance is only a fictional world, or on the other hand may be convinced that it is of some significance to his ideology. This latter choice that entails a degree of commitment on his part becomes the source of efficacy because it affects his system of belief and may cause some change to future action.¹¹³

Another concept discussed by Kershaw that may contribute to the potential efficacy of performance is that of community. Community, or a concrete grouping of people, can work as a mediating force between the individual actions of a spectator and the structures that shape society. Communities may be identified on the basis of their geographical location or an ideology or interest, and are the potential site for ideological opposition to the status quo. If a performance engages with the ideological identity of a particular group, it has the potential to create powerful change in the future. It must also be understood that any given performance may have different responses in different audiences or communities. This ideological relativity of a performance therefore leads us to understand that the context of a performance affects its ideological meaning and a performance may have the tendency to achieve different meanings or readings according to the context in which it occurs. This idea may be directly related to the previously discussed example of *Burqavaganza*, where objections were raised by more conservative sections of the society but the play was lauded for its boldness by more liberal audiences in and outside Pakistan, and was also invited to perform at the annual National School of Drama Festival in Delhi in 2007. Therefore, the ideological positioning of an audience influences the range of the performance's context and the number of ways it can be read in.

¹¹³ Kershaw, *ibid*, pp.28-29

When audiences respond in a collective manner because of their ideological identities, this forms the basis of performance efficacy. These collective responses link individual responses of each audience member to the wider development of his society.¹¹⁴

Beyond Brecht – The Radical in Performance

Traditionally political theatre has been understood mainly with reference to left wing theatre. Writer and practitioner Irwin Piscator elucidates about his efforts to create a theatre that would champion the cause of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie in his seminal text “The Political Theatre”. His Marxist theatre aimed to promote revolution and depose institutions of capitalism and replace exploitation with justice. Many theatre practitioners such as Brecht followed these convictions and articulated a rich dialogue between theatre and politics through their work. Inherent in their work and in this tradition of political theatre was an understanding that the pictures of the world presented by Marxist and socialist political theorists were fundamentally accurate perceptions of reality. Brecht’s vision of theatre encompassed a world that would enjoy a growing measure of justice, equality and freedom.¹¹⁵

However the notion of political theatre has been under question in the wake of post-modernism and other related theories. With Left progressive ideologies on the decline, political theatre that was defined in the light of Marxist ideologies is now challenged by the new promiscuity of the political. The political has become more personal and is omnipresent in every aspect of culture, and in all theatre and performance. Such promiscuity gives rise to ideological relativities when examining one aesthetic approach and its efficacy as more politically promising than the other. While a certain performance may have a resounding political impact on one audience, another may find it ideologically unconvincing. In a book that examines the notion of the radical in performance, Baz Kershaw suggests that radical performance may replace political theatre because it can allow us to directly encounter issues that are raised by the promiscuity of post-modernism and broaden the scope of encountering these issues. In the

¹¹⁴ Kershaw, *ibid*, pp.29-35

¹¹⁵ Baz Kershaw, *The Radical in Performance. Between Brecht and Baudrillard*, Routledge, London and New York, 1999, p.67 and 17

same vein, if the scope from the political to the radical is broadened, it will allow for a thorough mapping of the territory that is gained by taking a fresh look at the politics of performance.¹¹⁶

With the collapse of communism in Russia and Eastern Europe, the place of theatre in post-industrial societies has become progressively compromised, and its potential for radicalism is becoming questionable. Old notions of political theatre are dismissed in a world of capital consumerism and theatre has become a marginal commodity in the “capitalist cultural marketplace”. At the same time, performance has emerged as a key component in almost every aspect of the socio-political domain of a mediatised world. With the mediatization of society, the theatrical is dispersed by inserting performance in every aspect of everyday life. However, as communication becomes more globalised and presents the life of other cultures more performatively, its proliferation makes it all the more difficult to identify the radical in performance. This new importance of performance has become a key feature of post-modernity, but post-modernity has also created an end to all the human certainties of a modernist past. This condition has liberated the individual to construct himself as he desires, but has also raised questions about how and what we are to base our judgements on. While modernist aesthetic forms in performance work on the assumption that stable meanings may be shared between the actor and audience, the stage and auditorium, post-modernist aesthetic forms work towards disrupting these assumptions by deconstructing the process of meaning-making itself. In seeking to identify the radical in performance, Kershaw finds these paradigms of modernism and post-modernism intertwined, rather than in opposition to each other. For any performance to be identified as radical, it must be connected to the conditions of the contemporary and to the cultural, political and social tensions of its time. He invokes Brecht and Baudrillard in the subtitle of his book to represent modernist and post-modernist perspectives, because they provide radical perspectives on the socio-political significance of performance from very contrasting points of view and provide the means to explore the radical in contemporary performance through several analytical perspectives at the same time. For, Kershaw explains, the greatest radical turbulence may be found in performance when modernist and post-modernist views of the world collide.

¹¹⁶ Kershaw, *ibid*, pp.16-17

In elaborating the diminishing role of theatre in the making of a radical socio-political agenda, Kershaw draws distinctions between theatre and performance in order to represent the shift between paradigms; from cohesion to fragmentation, from unity to plurality or from cultures to multi-cultures to name a few. Compared to the limitations of theatre that is embedded in its institutional structures, the limitlessness of performance beyond theatre in the cultural, social and political shifts of the twentieth century is able to engage with the tensions created by fundamental changes in established theories, traditions and practices. Kershaw argues that theatre has in post-industrial societies become a victim of its own success in the global marketplace of culture. As a result, theatre and its performances, despite staging radical post-modern plays, have succumbed to a commodification that has stifled any possibility of radicalism.¹¹⁷

Commoditisation as a process

Igor Kopytof discusses the production of commodities as a cultural and cognitive process wherein an object is marked not only as a thing but also culturally marked as a *kind* of thing. In what he describes as a “processual” model of commoditisation, Kopytof argues that objects move in and out of the state of commoditisation at various paces, times, and according to our perceptions. Such shifts and differences on whether a thing is perceived as a commodity or not represents the moral economy that stands behind the objective economy of visible transactions. In contemporary western thought physical objects and the rights to them are represented as the universe of commodities on one end of the pole, and people, placed in the natural universe of individuation and singularisation, on the other. Of course these categories have been made fluid as seen in the example of slavery where people have been commoditised as slaves. Here the processual mode comes into play when the status of a slave changes from commodity to being decommoditised when he is inserted in a society. However this singularity bears the potential of being commoditised yet again when the slave’s potential exchange value is realised. Through this example of the biographical consideration of enslavement, Kopytoff argues that we may understand the commoditisation of other things in a similar light, as part of the cultural shaping of biographies. While things have a range of biographies attached to them (social, technical or economic), they may not necessarily be cultural. What makes a biography culturally informed is

¹¹⁷ Kershaw, *ibid*, pp.15-23

the way the object is viewed as a culturally constructed entity, with culturally specific meaning, and classified and reclassified into culturally constituted categories.¹¹⁸

In any given economic system, there are things that are widely exchangeable and there are some that are not. Neither of these extremes are possible on their own, and within every society which is homogeneous in terms of valuation, there is the heterogeneity of objects that are singular and cannot be perceived as commodities. It is the role of culture to impose a collective order upon the world by carving out, through discrimination and classification, distinct areas of homogeneity within the overall heterogeneity. Such systems of classification through culture reflect the structure and cultural resources of the societies in which they operate. Culture serves as the counterdrive to commoditisation and its essence to attach value to everything. It resists the commoditisation of some things, ensures that some things remain clearly singular and even resingularises something that has been previously commoditised. In every society there are things which are culturally prohibited from being commoditised, such as public lands, state art collections or monuments. Often such prohibitions are also extended when commodities are pulled out from their sphere and singularised. However, the fact that an object has been exchanged for value does not guarantee its subsequent status of remaining a commodity. Unless formally decommoditised, a commoditised thing will remain as a potential commodity and its deactivation from the commodity sphere can still leave it open to collective and individual redefinitions of singularisation. These shifts indicate that in any society the individual is caught between the cultural structure of commoditisation and his own personal attempts to bring value order to the universe of things. While things are endlessly enumerated in classifications, the individual can play with these classifications, create innumerable classes and values, and change the spheres of exchange. In any given society, the public culture offers discriminating classifications of value for goods and services. These classifications are constantly competing with the classifications by individuals and small networks. The individual's version of exchange is varied, idiosyncratic and also shifts contextually and biographically as the originator's perspectives, affiliations and interests shift. This results not only in a debate

¹¹⁸ Igor Kopytoff, "The cultural biography of things: commoditisation as process", in *The Social Life of Things. Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, (ed) Arjun Appadurai, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge UK, 2003, pp.64-68

between people and groups but also with each person as well. When previously distinct exchange spheres merge, rules become less clear and more open to individual interpretations. Kopytoff's example of African art objects being sold at auctions as collectibles, shows the shift from the culturally defined sentimental value to objects, to a matter of individual choice. In complex societies publicly recognised commoditisation therefore operates along with schemes of valuation and singularisation devised by individuals or groups and these schemes stand in constant conflict with public commoditisation as well as with one another.¹¹⁹

In these processes of commoditisation and decommo ditisation, it is evident that capitalism has the capacity to transform anything into a commodity form, and this includes artefacts and cultural productions that were created in the first place as instruments of critique. Caught up in the conflict between commoditisation and singularisation are individuals, who maintain some private vision of a hierarchy of exchange spheres. The justification for this hierarchy does not lie within the exchange sphere but is located outside it, in an autonomous system such as aesthetics, morality or religion for instance. Paradoxes are evident when things participate in intermeshed exchange spheres. A Picasso for instance is perceived as priceless, but nevertheless has a value attached to it. Its singularity is not determined by its exchange value but rather with its place in the sphere of singular art. But once in the museum it must be insured, attaching a value to it and transforming art into a commodity. Hence singularisations of various kinds are constantly accompanied by commoditisation.

In contemporary societies, commoditisation invades every aspect of existence, and the collective culture of a modern society is unable to cope with the flattening of values that follows it. While this frustrates the individual on the one hand, it also opens possibilities for a multitude of classifications, exhibiting the economics of the society as a homogenous area of commodities on the one hand, and a heterogeneous varied area of private valuation on the other. This intertwining of spheres allows for rules to be broken, permitting movement between spheres

¹¹⁹ Kopytoff, *ibid*, pp.70-80

that are originally meant to be separate, and showing how spheres are reorganised and things within them reshuffled in the course of a society's history.¹²⁰

The Commodification of Theatre

Kopytoff's discussion on the processes of commoditisation clearly indicates that in the processual model of commoditisation where objects move in and out of the state of being commodities, shifts also occur whereby artefacts and cultural productions undergo a transformation under capitalism. Kershaw's reference to theatre becoming a commodity under capitalist consumerism and a mediatised world and Kopytoff's identification of the commoditisation of instruments of social critique indicate the effects of these on theatre. The relationship of Kopytoff's arguments with what follows in Kershaw's discussion on the commodification of theatre specifically is indicative of the changes theatre has undergone from being a tool of socio political critique to one that can now be adapted as a consumerist product, available for employment by and for various purposes. The shift in theatre's role as a commodity encourages its further employment as a tool by NGOs and the development sector to perpetuate their agendas.

In the discussion that follows, Kershaw identifies the institutional characteristics of theatre that have contributed towards its commodification in the West with particular reference to the United Kingdom. With the formal integration of theatre into a cultural market place, there is little room for the radical voice. Whether it is through the architecture of theatre halls or through financial pressures imposed by the state which demand a rethinking of theatre's role, this reshaping of theatre not only reinvents it, but also creates means of "secondary consumption", in the form of artefacts associated with the productions. In Kopytoff's argument we understand the invasion of commoditisation in every aspect of existence, and the subsequent transformation of theatre that was previously considered as a cultural artefact.

Kershaw describes performances in theatre buildings to be embedded in theatre as a disciplinary system. To elaborate, he quotes Henri Lefebvre's ideas which frame theatre as a

¹²⁰ Kopytoff, *ibid*, pp.82-88

space of domination shaped by the ruling ideologies of society and made for purposes of power and control that often work against the interests of the majority. In examining new disciplines of theatre that have developed in the twentieth century, Kershaw looks at theatre that has participated in processes of commodification, as well as a system of cultural production that aims to shape formations such as class, gender, race and generation in a society. In his analysis, Kershaw also explores theatre as a method of spatial indoctrination that aims to embed social values in the behaviour of its participants through the pleasurable submission that is produced by theatre buildings.

The global success of late capitalism has created a wider variety of theatres enhancing the choices in the range of types of theatre for the public. But this pluralism has also led to a cultural conformity, making the “theatre estate” integral to the disciplines of late capitalist consumerism, similar to the spread of shopping malls, heritage sites and other tourist venues. These aspects are a few of the features in contemporary society that are geared to the production of economic, social and cultural inequality in society. As theatre increasingly becomes a social institution, notions of equality and mutual exchange are banished from it and theatre is transformed into a disciplined market-place where oppositional voices and radical programmes for progressive social change have no place.¹²¹

During the 1980's and the 1990's British subsidised theatre came under immense political pressure to make it more market-oriented. Under Thatcherism, a shift was seen in the ideologies of funding agencies such as the Arts Council in the way their “clients” (the national, repertory and fringe theatre companies) related to the public. This struggle between modernist and post-modernist cultural dynamics, the move from essentialist to instrumentalist views of the functions of the arts in society can be viewed as a means to transfer authority from the producers to the consumers. This was achieved primarily by an increasing commodification of theatre and performance and the transformation of art as traditionally defined, to art as a contemporary cultural product. Traditionally the Arts Council of Great Britain's (ACGB) policies were based on the view that the artist has something special to offer to the society and

¹²¹ Kershaw, *ibid*, pp.31-32

therefore deserves to be protected from market forces and state interference. Based on a modernist tradition, this notion holds that art has inherent redemptive, rejuvenative qualities and its transformative power is placed in the artwork through the superior productive abilities of the artist. These policies experienced a shift in the 1980's when Thatcher's government demanded more accountability and value for money in public institutions. A changed trend in cultural policy making influenced the transformation of theatre as a business or industry and framed a new relationship and new ideological roles for both art and its audience in late capitalist society. As theatre audiences and gallery visitors were turned into arts customers with the stamp of empirical authority, by the start of the 1990's British cultural policy had been refashioned to favour the commodification and marketisation of art. This redesigning of the cultural policy and transformation of the arts patron into a customer of culture reinvented the theatre's disciplinary mechanisms. Throughout the 1990's the ACGB encouraged theatres in the subsidised sector to improve upon its methods and follow trends of London's West End such as advertising, and foyer services. There was an increased spending on promotional material and more sophisticatedly designed brochures. As activities such as film screenings and music events associated to the performance became more common, the processes attached to the pleasures of theatre-going gained as much emphasis in the consumption of theatre as the production itself. This drift towards populism also saw a decline in the presentation of classical drama and a rise in musicals. Apart from the production itself, the audience member had at his disposal a growing number of performance related commodities; T-shirts, badges, posters and all sorts of memorabilia, so that while the performance itself became a fading memory its traces could be found in countless objects. This commodification also creates opportunities for "secondary consumption" of performance, as the artefacts can become a substitute for the performance itself. Through such trends we find that the peripherals of theatre have overwhelmed the power of the performance, and theatre's commodification has been achieved by reshaping the patron in the guise of a consuming shopper.

In post-modern societies, these transformations of culture have also given rise to other developments regarding audiences. The middle class domination of theatre is now challenged by a heterogeneity of audiences. This heterogeneity is emphasised by the collapse of traditional

aesthetic hierarchies under the pressure of populism, as well as the growth of offers such as the “theatre package tour” which make the performance one part of a services-included packaged trip and an accessible outing. As cultural barriers diminish, theatre offers a plurality of uses. While theatre has an enhanced place in the cultural realm through an increased number of theatre-goers and its growth of secondary consumption through artefacts and media, there is also a lack of cohesion that is brought about by the heterogeneity of its audiences. The separation of theatre from any particular social formation suggests a dispersal of power. It becomes difficult then, to talk about theatre as a form that might allow for instance, the middle classes to consolidate their position in the social order. Instead we have the post-modern spectacle of a “fragmenting democratisation of consumption” that turns theatre as a cultural resource into a commodity of capital.

Kershaw explains that the significant changes that have been seen in the patterns of use of theatre in Britain may be understood through an evaluation of the dominant social functions of theatre in general. Theatres are largely used by the middle classes to strengthen their power base in the social hierarchy. This acquisition of cultural capital may endow the middle classes with authority but it also subjugates them to the powers of the dominant order. The empowerment is achieved through an active occupation of the institution of theatre, while disempowerment occurs because of the passive consumption of theatre’s performances. So, an active use of the theatre’s institutions is accompanied by a passive acceptance of its meanings and values. Viewed from this point of view, the theatre as a service industry does not allow the consumer to determine the tune and places the audience member in a very exacting contract between the producer and the consumer. One of the reasons for this can be perceived through examining the way the architecture of theatre works in this context. Richard Schechner describes the nineteenth century proscenium theatre as a model of capitalism, designed to include elements such as the hierarchy of seating and prices, or for instance an opulently decorated proscenium arch and curtain to efface the machinery of production. In the post-modern world, Schechner points out, we are confronted with a variety of theatre architectures besides the dominant proscenium arch. This may uncover the aspect of dominance and hegemony but as Kershaw points out, this proliferation of theatre forms is an illusion of choice,

and is, like for other commodities really a dominance of one type of product rather than one brand. The marketisation and commodification of the entire system is a mechanism that relegates most people to subordination in the cultural system. Therefore, Western theatre in the late twentieth century may be the site for an increased access and a variety of uses of what was previously a domain for the construction of the middle classes, but the new heterogeneous audience is still the object of consumerism. Whether modernist or post-modernist, theatre productions that occupy the established architecture of the theatrical estate are inevitably thrust under the realm of global commodification. The works may critique or attack the values of consumerism and commodification, but the disciplines of the theatre estate have been so developed that they threaten the commodification of even the slightest radical impulse.¹²²

The commodification of theatre in Pakistan is seen visibly through the proliferation of theatre groups and the variety of theatre productions that have been available to an all too ready audience in the recent years. 2009 itself has seen a plethora of festivals and productions in Karachi, that have ranged from western musical imitations, classical Urdu plays, and adaptations of Indian seminal plays to name a few. A majority of these have been funded by the corporate industry that projects itself through advertising in and outside the auditorium. The success of the production is often gauged by the financial support it gains through sponsorship and it is a normal sight to see billboards sponsored by Mc Donald across the city advertising forthcoming plays by the National Academy of Performing Arts. The voluntary nature of theatre productions with a political agenda are a thing of the past and each production is weighed by its financial feasibility. Productions such as “Chicago” and “Mamma Mia” have attracted upper middle class English-speaking audiences by the hundreds. More recently productions claiming the presence of television stars who have no experience of theatre have aimed to employ theatre purely as a financial venture. Seminal theatre groups *Tehrik e Niswan* and *Ajoka* have both held anniversary festivals, which have boasted full houses for most shows and these activities have been supplemented, as Kershaw has identified, with artefacts related to the production. Folk dances in the foyer on the opening night, and documentaries to project the groups’ work have supplemented the marketable products available in the foyer, much like the

¹²² Kershaw, *ibid*, pp.41-56

ones described by Kershaw for the Western theatre models. *Tehrik e Niswan* and *Ajoka* T-shirts, mugs, catalogues, DVDs and CDs have been purchased with as much interest as tickets for the plays. The publicity for these events is ever more enhanced, with pre-festival or pre-production pilot introductory programmes on both English and Urdu television channels. The outreach through the mediatization of these events has in fact assisted in drawing audiences, further enhanced by outreach through social networking sites such as Facebook. At the same time, we have seen a growth of theatre as a tool for development agencies whereby issues and agendas of interest to NGOs and funding bodies have found theatre as a means of advocating depoliticised social rather than political agendas. Specific productions held for target audiences have enhanced statistical information in the records of these funding bodies and have been mere financial enterprises for both the NGOs and the theatre groups involved in the process. A recent *Tehrik e Niswan* production *Meri Zindagi Ka Safar* (The Journey of My Life) based on issues pertaining to early marriage and the poor care of women's reproductive health, was shown to an audience of about 700 members of the medical profession as part of a seminar on women's health in Karachi in February 2010. While the play projected the issues prescribed by the funding organisation very specifically, it played to an audience of gynaecologists and nurses who are already aware of the issues at hand. The very fact that it was shown to an already sensitised audience in a five-star hotel in Karachi that did not allow access to the communities it should have targeted, relegated the production to mere entertainment value besides being a means of a generous income for the theatre group. These approaches are also visible in the use of theatre as a social reform tool by companies that employ Boal's techniques in a very isolated manner, without considering the realities of the communities they perform for. (Specific to Pakistan, this is discussed in detail in chapter Six). Hence the role of theatre as a socio political tool has been uprooted and reinvented under capitalism to become a source of capital gain for the donors as well as the theatre groups who cater to these needs.

Performance Beyond Theatre

In the quest to find the radical in performance beyond the institutionalisation of theatre, Kershaw discusses forms of performance that have emerged as a challenge to the dominant mainstream. In the West in the past forty years or so, there has been a proliferation of performance beyond

theatre, known under the varied titles of fringe, underground, alternative theatre, and elsewhere in the world known as theatre for liberation, theatre for development, or popular theatre. What began in the 1950s and 1960s as scattered attempts to reinvent the socio-political role of theatre has now become a global phenomenon. By the end of the twentieth century a range of innovative practices established themselves beyond the mainstream and often opposed by traditionally minded theatre historians and critics.

The post-modernist critique of the modernist avant-garde is that the aesthetic objects that were once considered radical are now part of the dominant mainstream. In the context of theatre this may be seen in the aestheticisation of Brecht in post-war European theatre where the formal characteristics of Epic theatre replace the political relevance of the plays. In other words, Kershaw explains, mainstream culture will always catch up with the avant-gardes and incorporate them into the dominant ideologies because that is their socio-political destiny. Kershaw identifies new performance practices of the last decade or so to be more articulated to their local and global socio-cultural contexts and therefore different to the kind of performances created by the modernist avant-garde theatrical movements because most of these practices have been shaped in self created circumstances, in fresh venues and beyond existing theatres. The widespread side-stepping of the disciplinary structures of the physical and social architecture of theatre buildings can be viewed as a dismantling of dominant modes of creativity to destabilise traditional notions of political theatre and to open up through performance unexpected sources of democratised power.¹²³ The example of the lantern procession “Glasgow All Lit Up!” organised by Welfare State International as part of Glasgow’s European City of the Year programme is discussed by Kershaw to address the question of political radicalism in post-modern performance. In a lantern making activity that eventually culminated in a procession of ten thousand people carrying eight thousand lanterns, the project carried many characteristics of post modernism. The collective identity of the people carrying lanterns was juxtaposed with the plurality of its heterogeneous participants. At the same time the procession inserted radicalism into the politics of civil society and the systems of governance by challenging the police in the way the route was planned. The procession became the dominant discourse in the

¹²³ Kershaw, *ibid*, pp.59-62

public domain and the law did not manage to mediate the interaction of the civil society (the procession) and the State (the police). In this way the symbolic discourse of the procession was translated into another discourse; one that might be identified as a radical, non-violent political demonstration for the autonomous rights of the individual and collective identities. In temporarily transgressing the institutions of democratic government, the procession opened up a new space of radical freedom.

This project illuminates how performative excess unhindered by theatre can be much freer to create new domains for radically democratic practice. As Kershaw argues, if performance can highlight some of the sources of worldwide oppression by exposing how the politics of representation can be used to reinforce the marginalisation of minority groups, and if it can create a fresh cultural space in which the silenced majorities may find a voice, then it can lead to the wider liberation of humankind's most precious resource.¹²⁴ Kershaw's discussion on finding the radical in performance beyond theatre embedded in institutions is an essential debate towards finding alternatives to the depoliticised nature of theatre in Pakistan. While theatre that was political at one point has entered the mainstream, and has also been reinvented to fashion the expressions of the very specific issues of the development world, it is these boundaries that it needs to dismantle in order to address new ways of expressing the radical, and creating a "fresh cultural space".

Brecht's relevance today

Professor Marc Silberman states that in order to consider whether Brecht is relevant today one must consider whether political art is relevant today. For this he thinks it would be useful to consider Brecht's "interventionist" thinking, which was a central component in his own conviction of the need to change the world. Silberman makes the connections between "thinking" and "intervention" as follows: Thinking is a contemplative relationship with an object, an event or with the world, and marks a distancing relationship between the subject and the object. It triggers logic and analysis and deconstructs and reconstitutes the object that one is thinking about. Intervention is the opposite of thinking as it suggests an act. From the perspective of a

¹²⁴ Kershaw, *ibid*, pp.74-86

subject, intervention refers to the changing of an object, the course of an event, or the condition of the world. Interventionist thinking is typical of Brecht's approach where the intensification of contradictions found solutions in the form of dynamic aesthetic forms. Interventionist thinking not only demands contemplation but also application, and is the result of aesthetic forms that motivate the reader / audience through an analytical and distancing process. Silberman uses this definition to maintain that political art and interventionist thinking in Brecht's sense is still imaginable today. While Brecht's plays address specific political themes, (for example "*The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*" addresses Hitler's ascent to power), they should not be read within these specifics only. Rather, the plays aimed to *use* events to generate in his audience a political attitude and a desire to change things. Brecht's plays aimed at the conservative institutions of art and towards the breaking of the passive nature of the audience. As an abstraction Silberman considers interventionist thinking to be still viable, but also suggests that the questions about the relevance of Brecht's techniques that were devised for specific social situations and institutions in the 1930's, 40's and 50's cannot be considered universally, as interventionist thinking will be engaged with differently in different contexts, such as different countries or cultures.

Brecht's ideas towards a more just society did not seek to provide answers on how to make the world better, but instead his writings aimed towards *how to ask* questions, and how to formulate the right questions for situations that were untenable and therefore required change. He believed in the power of reason that enabled people to recognise problems around them and to solve them, and his critique of emotions was not directed against feeling or spontaneity, but rather towards the *function* of emotions in traditional theatre. The relevance of his work may be seen in the fact that like interventionist thinking, Brecht's belief in reason is a practical concept that enables individuals to determine that reason and act on its behalf.

Brecht lived in a time when the image of the artist as a politically and socially engaged individual was in correspondence to the expectations of the public. Today the autonomy of artists and thinkers seems more important. Silberman argues that in a historical situation that devalues strategies of critique, we need models of oppositional voices, so that we remember

the necessity of protest. And he finds such a model in Brecht. In our times, when the media shapes the values of public opinion, where social life is characterised by dispersal and stress, we need tools to strengthen insight and destabilise habits of seeing. Silberman thus concludes that Brecht's main contribution was the innovative ways he devised for examining history and making the processes of history visible as changeable ones. The search for ways to fix meanings (possibly multiple meanings in a post-modern age) is modelled for us in Brecht's work. Brecht's impact is not to be found in any formula, but rather in his writings that help enable our creativity in thinking about historical processes.¹²⁵

I now turn my attention to introducing the work of *Ajoka* and *Tehrik e Niswan*, and introduce one play each from their repertoire, that represents ideological similarities with Brecht's and Badal Sircar's theories. Badal Sircar's plays also showed similarities to the Brechtian tradition, and both examples discussed aim to attain a form of theatre that engages the audience in critical thinking, employs alternative means of expression from the traditional proscenium theatre, uses the folk tradition to inform the plays in a more culturally relevant fashion and aims to make a more immediate connection between the actors and the audience.

¹²⁵ Marc Silberman, "Brecht Today", http://www.logosjournal.com/issue_5.3/silberman.htm, accessed 25 August 2009

CHAPTER 3

Stages of Resistance

In this chapter I will look at the work of *Tehrik e Niswan* and *Ajoka* in the 1980's more closely. I begin this chapter with a detailed description of seminal works by these groups in this decade, examining their stylistic concerns and aesthetic, dramaturgical, theoretical influences that informed their work.

I have chosen one play from each repertoire, *Jaloos* (Procession, 1984) by *Ajoka* (an adaptation of Indian theatre practitioner Badal Sircar's play *Michhil* (tr. Procession) (Kolkata, 1972), and *Anji* (1985) by *Tehrik e Niswan* (an adaptation of Indian playwright Vijay Tendulkar's play of the same title in Hindi). These serve as examples of the development of their dramaturgical and political ideologies, making links to the development of their works through specific methodologies and traditions.

I discuss these plays with a view to articulating further the influence of Indian political theatre and playwrights on both groups, as well as the aesthetic concerns that they took on in their productions. I analyse *Jaloos* as an example of the stylistic concerns that were different from conventional theatrical devices and were devised by Badal Sircar to break away from the proscenium theatre. The theme of the disappearance of young men in the urban landscape, who are victims of state oppression, was no less familiar in the Pakistani context. At the same time, the breaking of the proscenium format and integrating the audience as closely as possible in the action is very similar to Brechtian alienation techniques. In discussing *Anji*, I highlight the stylistic concerns of the production to make connections with the importance Brecht lends to aesthetics and entertainment. Borrowing from the traditional *Nautanki* form, the play employs devices that assist in reinforcing the alienation effect that Brecht speaks of. I limit my discussion here to *Anji's* stylistic concerns and take up the discussion on Brecht's distancing or alienation techniques through another play by *Tehrik e Niswan* in the following chapter.

Following this, I investigate the inception, evolution and practices of both *Tehrik e Niswan* and *Ajoka* theatre groups, in the light of their political beliefs and their methodologies. The discussion is based on interviews with the founders of both groups, examining the circumstances that motivated their establishment and the journeys they undertook in the early years after their inception. I also examine the groups' urban theatre practice and community theatre objectives in this decade.

Here, I am making a distinction between the "urban theatre practice" and "community theatre practice" in the works of these two groups on the basis of the difference between the two approaches as far as audience, aesthetics and dramaturgy is concerned. By "urban theatre practice" I mean the theatre

that these groups created as part of their repertoire and that which was shown in auditoria to an upper middle class and middle class audience. These plays could be at least a minimum of one per year and encompass all the elements of dramaturgy. Depending on the finances of the group, these shows may or may not have had a gate fee. I will discuss the nature of funding for these productions, (which was largely voluntary in the initial stages of both groups), the basis of selecting specific works for production and the motivations behind such decisions. While the works in the repertoire were varied, both groups developed a clear objective from the beginning: an inherent adherence to their respective ideologies of promoting human rights, and the need to define a language for theatre that was alternate to the more familiar and popularly practiced western-influenced genres.

By “community theatre practice” I refer to the theatre groups’ outreach in the low-income communities, with the main distinction being that of the audience. Extracted from their repertoires, plays taken to the communities were stripped down to become more “mobile” versions of the plays done before, and conveyed their message to the community audience. Often invited by local charity organisations in a range of communities, these plays were free of charge for the audience. This chapter will also, more importantly, discuss the voluntary nature of their mobile or activist theatre that was taken to communities. In the early years of their career, both groups practiced community theatre in a sporadic and less organised manner in the absence of NGOs or any organised system to facilitate their practice. The NGO phenomenon was not so extensive or organised during this period and the plays taken to the communities represented the groups’ own political commitments. This discussion will allow the drawing of parallels later with the description of donor-driven theatre projects that the groups (and other new emerging groups) took on later.

Common grounds

Perhaps one of the reasons for success of both *Ajoka* and *Tehrik e Niswan* in sustaining their practices is their commitment to a political belief that remains the underlying motivation of their work. This political commitment stems from the Leftist inclinations of both groups, which was a result of influences initiated in the home environment (Gauhar, *Ajoka* theatre) or a personal quest that led to friends and affiliations in the Left movement (Kermani, *Tehrik e Niswan*). Whether it was Kermani's support of the trade union activists in Karachi or Gauhar's support of the farmers and workers in Punjab, both groups showed an integral belief in voicing protest against the oppression of the poor. In fact in a recent paper, Kermani re-asserts her links to these beliefs, "While still in school I had started reading (about) Marxism and had become acutely sensitive to the class discrimination that is so blatant in our society. I still believe in the Marxist ideology with its vision of a classless society where men and women hold an equal status".¹²⁶ Both groups in the early years of their careers performed at workers' union rallies and for organisations that were affiliated with them as reiterations of their own political commitments. This and their association with the Women's Movement that emerged in the years of General Zia ul Haque's Martial Law, motivated the groups to perform plays that reflected their beliefs. *Tehrik e Niswan* emerged when Kermani set up literacy centres for women working in factories and *Ajoka* performed plays that spoke against a repressive regime in the face of harsh anti-women laws of Zia's military rule. For both theatre groups, raising a voice of protest against the oppression and authority of the state were objectives in common with their own commitments.

Another reason is perhaps that over the years, and especially in the early years, they have had the following of a faithful audience that shared their political beliefs and supported their cause of challenging the establishment, and also participated in this defiance by attending the plays as an audience. Both groups' affiliation to Brecht may be understood by the fact that the themes in Brecht's plays are relevant even today to the socio-political conditions of Pakistan. The issues of class struggle are evident in Pakistan today along with the growing rich and poor divide and the consumerist society where the poor are exploited. As Shahid Nadeem explained in a television interview, *Ajoka* felt ideologically close to Brecht and his concepts of

¹²⁶ Sheema Kermani, "Feminist Politics of TEN", August 2009, unpublished document

epic theatre, the role of the actor and theatre in a social context and his employment of South Asian theatre traditions in his work.¹²⁷ *Ajoka's* adaptation of Brecht's *Caucasian Chalk Circle* (*Chaak Chakkar*) was presented for the first time in 1985, revived in 1990 and now revived once again in 2008¹²⁸, each time finding new a resonance to the political and social conditions of the country. The themes in the play; the totality of war, the difficulty of choice, doing the right thing, may be universal concerns, but do form the basis of critical thinking for an audience that may make connections to current political concerns through the interpretations of the theatre group's adaptation. For its first production, *Ajoka* adapted the play to suit the political environment of the country at that time. Gauhar explains that in this performance, when the governor is hung in the beginning of the play, she could hear the audience making connections to the hanging of Z.A Bhutto.¹²⁹ These specific contexts which allow for an easy translation of Brecht's plays within Pakistan's political and social context, along with Silberman's views on the capacity of Brecht's work to equip audiences to formulate the right questions for situations that are untenable and therefore require change, keep Brecht's relevance valid in our context today.

The affiliation both groups showed in their work with theatre in India, mostly through following theatrical practices in India and borrowing scripts or reinventing traditional forms, can be attributed to interest in a tradition with more diverse material to inform their work. The commonality of language made this task easier with theatre in Hindi, because while the scripts of Hindi and Urdu are very different, the sound of the language is very similar and has potential for easy adaptation. In the absence of original material written for theatre in Urdu, both groups were able to borrow from Indian scripts without anticipating much difficulty in translation and further adaptation. This is more true for *Tehrik e Niswan* as *Ajoka's* work ultimately grew in a different direction with Nadeem's original scripts.

¹²⁷ Shahid Nadeem, television interview, *The Alternative*, DAWN News, 20 May 2008

¹²⁸ *Musafat. The Journey Continues. Celebrating 25 years of Ajoka Theatre*. Festival Brochure, *Ajoka Theatre*, Lahore, 2009, p.3,

¹²⁹ Erven, *ibid*, p.163

Stylistic concerns

Methods and strategies discussed through *Ajoka's Jaloos* and *Tehrik e Niswan's Anji*

Before discussing the inception of both theatre groups under discussion, the ideologies that motivated them and the works that became their seminal productions, I examine the strategies they employed as part of their creative agenda through two specific plays in the early years of their inception. I will discuss *Jaloos*, an adaptation of Badal Sircar's play *Michhil* as an example of *Ajoka's* means of beginning their work by seeking theatrical forms that were different from the more familiarly practiced western traditions of proscenium theatre. I will also discuss *Anji* as an example of *Tehrik e Niswan's* employment of traditional folk forms in theatre, and particularly employing the North Indian folk *Nautanki* traditions in this play.

It would also be important to mention that both *Ajoka* and *Tehrik e Niswan* have been influenced in their early years by developments in the Indian theatre scene. The authors of the two plays discussed below were, by the 1970s, influential figures in the movement to revive folk theatre traditions in India. Kathryn Hansen discusses these influences and the development of this movement in a paper written in 1984. Hansen argues that intellectual interest in folk theatre traditions had begun in India in the early 1950's and 1960's when the potential of folk theatre was acknowledged through documentation and writings and a need was felt for the synthesis of the rural and urban traditions. Discussions in the Round Table on the Contemporary Relevance of Traditional Theatre, organised by the Sangeet Natak Akademi in 1971 questioned the relationship of traditional forms to modern values, the role of a modern writer with regard to a thus far unfamiliar and unexplored traditional form, and the receptivity of an urban audience. It was nevertheless acknowledged that it was necessary for creative artists to recognise the vitality of these traditions and that the manner in which the modern and rural would be integrated would depend on individual playwrights. Writers like Sircar began to articulate this attention through their writings and works by the 1970s. Of the playwrights who employed traditional forms in their works, Hansen mentions Badal Sircar who wrote *Michhil* (Kolkata, 1972), Girish Karnad and Vijay Tendulkar the author of *Anji*. (place / date unknown)¹³⁰

¹³⁰ Kathryn Hansen, "Indian Folk Traditions and Modern Theatre", *Asian Folklore Studies*, Vol.42, No.1, Asian Folklore Studies Nanzan University, 1983, pp.78-79

Sircar wrote,

"Theatre is one of the fields where this [rural-urban] dichotomy is manifested most. The city theatre today is not a natural development of the traditional or folk theatre in the urban setting as it should have been. It is rather a new theatre having its base on Western theatre, whereas the traditional village theatre has retained most of its indigenous characteristics"¹³¹

In his quest to find a rural-urban synthesis, Sircar formed the Third Theatre, which emphasised physical movement over words and minimised the use of lights, costumes and props. This resulted in a more immediate connection between the actors and the spectators, a device which is very evident in his play *Spartacus* (1973). Stripped of sets and properties, this story of a Roman slave revolt relies entirely on the physical movement of the actors who move in groups among the spectators, a technique also employed in *Michhil*. While these methods were not directly drawn from rural traditions, they did aim to create the same sense of collective involvement that is an integral part of folk theatre.¹³²

Tendulkar's Marathi play *Sari Ga Sari*, (1964) utilized the *Tamasha* form and its characteristic vocabulary. Even though the play incorporated traditional forms such as the invocation to the God Ganpati, traditional songs and scenes depicting Krishna, the play also blended modern concerns in its satirical treatment and the references to contemporary urban life. In employing the *Tamasha* form, Tendulkar expressed an interest in capturing the spontaneity that the language of the form offered and incorporating these with the very contemporary issues his plays dealt with.¹³³

The use of traditional forms by these playwrights is not a simple aesthetic choice, but rather a means of commenting on the social and political aspects of their society. Hansen's

¹³¹ Badal Sircar, *The Third Theatre*, Calcutta 1978, cited in Hansen, *ibid*, p. 78

¹³² Hansen, *ibid*, pp.79-80

¹³³ *ibid*, p.79

makes an interesting connection; their plays represent the plight of the ordinary man and apart from an aesthetic preference, employ the language of the rural to advocate their cause.¹³⁴

Jaloos

Jaloos performed by *Ajoka* in 1984 as its first play is an adaptation of Badal Sircar's *Michhil*. Trained as a town planner, Sircar was well known playwright in India in the mid sixties. Around that time he opted to experiment with open theatre forms and developed a theatre of conscience, involved in social and political issues, and reaching to both the urban and rural areas.¹³⁵

*"Juloos, juloos... har gali, har mohalle, har sadak par juloos... naaro aur jhando
mein kho gaya hai mera astitva, mera wajood, meri identity...."*

(Every lane, every locality, every street has a procession... my identity, my existence is lost within slogans and flags)

*"Juloos juloos... janpath par juloos, rajpath par juloos... juloos raung raha hai
mujhe... kuchal raha hai mere sapne ko... til til mar raha hoon mein... mera
khoon ho raha hai..."*

(The Procession has made its way to Janpath, Rajpath... It is stifling me... It is trampling my dreams. Slowly, I am being stolen of my breath, I am being assassinated.)

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In an article by Shayoni Mitra on Sircar, the writer quotes Richard Schechner as he describes Sircar's concerns:

*"Badal knew that the 'modern theatre' of psychology, drama, the spoken word, the proscenium stage, the box set, and the separate audience was dead. Worse it was rotting".*¹³⁷

¹³⁴ *ibid*, p.88

¹³⁵ Jacob Srampickal, *Voice to the Voiceless. The Power of People's Theatre in India*, Hurst & Company, London, and St. Martin's Press, New York, 1994, p.106

¹³⁶ Hindi text excerpt and English translation of *Jaloos*, http://www.wheremumbai.com/article_archives.aspx?id=335&catid=13, accessed 8 February 2008

Expressing his dissatisfaction with proscenium theatre, Sircar also felt that the solution did not lie in drawing from the traditional theatre forms of India. He felt that there was a need to break away not just from the pre-colonial traditional forms, but also the western influenced forms in theatre that were imported by the British and were very prominent in post independence India.¹³⁸ This resulted in what became to be known as the *Third Theatre*. The emergence of Badal Sircar's *Third Theatre* in India made street theatre a force to be reckoned with. Sircar's experimental theatre was a form devised to differentiate between the Westernised proscenium theatre and traditional folk theatre, yet drawing elements from both. Sircar's *Third Theatre* was the result of a realisation that two very different kinds of theatre existed in India; the traditional¹³⁹, which varied according to the diverse regions of the country and was prevalent in the rural areas, and the Western influenced theatre imported largely during the colonial period and contained in the urban areas. The traditional theatre maintained its indigenous characteristics and had its audience in the masses of rural India."[...] the ideas and values dealt with remained mostly backward, sterile, even reactionary, or in any case unconnected with the problems of economic, social and cultural emancipation of the rural masses; whereas the city theatre could propagate progressive ideas and values to a sophisticated audience who would be mentally stimulated at best, but would not or could not act upon them".¹⁴⁰ In his quest to overcome this dichotomy, Sircar searched for a free theatre, which would neither belong to the urban middle and upper classes nor remain tied to the "backward values" unrelated to the lives of the rural masses. He gradually developed a flexible, portable and inexpensive theatre which performed in diverse venues ranging from rooms to public parks, villages, factories, to offices, and which depended on word of mouth publicity.¹⁴¹

¹³⁷ Richard Schechner, *Performative Circumstances: From the Avant Garde to Ramlila*, Seagull Books, Kolkata, 1983, p.25, cited in: Shayoni Mitra, "Badal Sircar. Scripting a Movement", *The Drama Review*, Volume 48, No.3, Fall 2004, New York University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, p.62

¹³⁸ Mitra, *ibid*

¹³⁹ Sircar lists a few forms of traditional theatre from different regions of India: *Jatra* in Bengal, *Tamasha* in Maharashtra, *Nautanki* in Uttar Pradesh, *Bhawai* in Gujarat, *Kathakali* in Kerala, and *Yakshagana* in Karnataka.

Badal Sircar, *The Changing Language Of Theatre*, Indian Council For Cultural Relations, New Delhi, 1982, p.30.

¹⁴⁰ Sircar, *ibid*, pp.33-34

¹⁴¹ Sircar, *ibid*, pp.30-34

The first play for the Third Theatre was *Michhil*, written originally in Bengali and is described by Van Erven as a “satire of Indian bourgeois egocentricity and its existential sense of loss”.¹⁴² Set in Kolkata, the story speaks about the countless disappearances of young men in an urban landscape. These young men can be described as victims of police and state oppression and cannot be accounted for. The two protagonists, possibly two expressions of the same character, the young and old Khoka meet in a search for the true procession, one that has not lost its meaning in a flood of repetitive and endless processions. The characters of the Police, the Master and the Guru are representations of violence, money and religion that the state employs to oppress its masses. *Michhil* ends with the actors inviting the audience to join them in making a human chain and sing an optimistic song.¹⁴³

Old Man: *Michhils, Michhils.* I've lost my way. Through roads and roads I seek a road, through *Michhils* and *Michhils* I seek the road to my home. Not the old home, but a different home, a real home, a really real home, *Michhils, Michhils...*

Khoka: *Michhils Michhils* in the streets, in the streams of masses, I'm being pulverised under the stamping feet in processions, I'm dying, I'm being killed, *Michhils, Michhils...*¹⁴⁴

The interaction with the audience in the final scene is reflective of Sircar's underlying ideology in the Third Theatre. Faced with the financial challenges that made it impossible for theatre groups to sustain themselves, Sircar found solutions in the form of reinventing the performing spaces. Comparing theatre to cinema, he stated that the one thing that cinema could not offer its audiences was “liveness”. Sircar decided that if “liveness” was a determining factor, then the proscenium arrangement impeded it by the employment of devices such as the box set, lights and other related accessories. In order to remove the distance between the audience and the performance, he found it necessary that the audience be inherently connected to the

¹⁴² Eugene Van Erven, *ibid*, p.165

¹⁴³ Mitra, *ibid*

¹⁴⁴ Badal Sircar, *Three Plays. Procession / Bhoma / Stale News*, Seagull Books, Calcutta, 1983, p.16

performance.¹⁴⁵ “The demand of the spectator in the new theatre is not an illusion of reality, but of reality itself, the reality of the presence of the performer”.¹⁴⁶ Hence a direct contact between the actor and audience and an acknowledgment of sharing the same space and each other’s presence became vital to Third Theatre. This new theatre enhanced the human presence and made redundant all other elaborate features like sets, costumes and lights. Gradually making this form of theatre flexible and portable, Sircar turned the Third Theatre into “free theatre” in terms of expression, paraphernalia and finances.¹⁴⁷ It is also interesting that in the English translation of the script, there are very clear instructions about the orientation of the performance space.

“*Procession* is not meant to be performed in the proscenium stage. It has to be performed in an open space with the audience seated all around it, or on the floor of a large room. If performed within, the chairs and backless benches for the audience should be so arranged as to suggest a maze, with a road going in knots and rounds. The road will constitute the acting area, with the audience sitting on both sides of the road; the way people stand on both sides of a street to watch a procession passing. The actors will have two entrances or exits.”¹⁴⁸ A diagram supports the given set of instructions.

Rustom Bharucha describes Sircar’s methodology:

“Sircar makes his audience confront their indifference at the chaos and corruption that characterise urban life. He never fails to emphasise that his spectators are responsible for the world they live in. Instead of exaggerating the threat of the exploiters, [...] Sircar focuses on the callousness of the middle class and their capacity to watch the suffering of the people without doing anything about it.”¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁵ Mitra, *ibid*, p.65

¹⁴⁶ Badal Sircar, *The Changing Language Of Theatre*, Indian Council For Cultural Relations, New Delhi, 1982, p.26

¹⁴⁷ Mitra, *ibid*

¹⁴⁸ Badal Sircar, *Three Plays. Procession / Bhoma / Stale News*, Seagull Books, Calcutta 1983, p. 3

¹⁴⁹ Rustom Bharucha, *Rehearsals for Revolutions, The Political Theatre of Bengal*, cited in Srampickal, *ibid*, p.109

Rejecting the proscenium stage and the distance it creates between the performer and spectator and aiming to take advantage of the live nature of theatre where direct communication between the performers and spectators was possible, Sircar aimed to introduce a greater participation on the part of the spectators in order to lead them to action. Although Sircar's theatre focuses on the lower middle class in Kolkata and their struggle for survival and indifference to the poverty in rural areas, his theatre group has performed in many villages as well, where the response has been enthusiastic. Sircar himself finds it surprising that the villagers accepted with ease the absence of traditional conventions such as plot, characters, melodramatic gestures and ornate diction, which were replaced by his innovative theatrical devices like stylised movement, chorus of voices, and non-verbal acting methods. Recalling this enthusiasm, he realised that the people understood the spirit of the play often more than the urban intelligentsia.¹⁵⁰

In character with Sircar's approach towards challenging proscenium theatre spaces and performing for audiences in streets, lecture halls, open spaces, *Ajoka's* production of *Jalbos* was also performed for audiences seated in the round, so that actors could interact with audiences in the unconventional performing space. The play's formal concerns challenged the conventional performing space, seating the audience in a labyrinth form, which reflected the confusions of life. Shifting between tragedy and farce, the adaptation was dominated by bold body movements interspersed with scenes that touched issues like religious and nationalistic fanaticism, hypocrisy in politics and death and the un preciousness of life.¹⁵¹ Given its unique form the play presented a sharp contrast to urban proscenium based plays that were prevalent in these times.

In Madeeha's own words, the play was a tremendous success. "As far as the technique was concerned, that play was quite innovative for us in Pakistan. It was done in the round and stressed physical movement over dialogue. People had never seen anything like this before."¹⁵²

¹⁵⁰ Rustom Bharucha, *Rehearsals for Revolution. The Political Theatre of Bengal*, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 1983, p.131

¹⁵¹ Evren, *ibid*

¹⁵² *ibid*

"The audience had got a taste of subversive, meaningful but entertaining theatre and the actors had realised that doing theatre without a stage, set, lights, costumes, sound system, props, and most importantly the censorship certificate, was possible. That was the beginning of the alternate theatre movement in Pakistan."¹⁵³

Its unique form came as an interesting change for an audience that was used to more conventionally presented plays. "To an audience sickened by the steady dose of drawing room farces, *Jaloos* revealed the possibilities of the stage as a powerful medium of entertainment and socio-political criticism."¹⁵⁴ The response the play received was very much in keeping with the sentiments of the people in the time that it was performed. The play received a lot of media attention and was appreciated for more than just its aesthetic value. The play represented an act of defiance against the laws that were being imposed upon the people by a new military regime. " [...] it was theatre of defiance and the cause for seeing theatre was the sense of participation in that defiance rather than the contentment of seeing a good work of art."¹⁵⁵

Anji

Anji is *Tehrik e Niswan's* Urdu adaptation of the Indian playwright Vijay Tendulkar's play of the same title in Hindi, originally written in Marathi under the title *Chi Sau Ka* and later translated into Hindi by Dr. Vasant Deo.¹⁵⁶ Tendulkar's early plays brought in the realities of urban modern life to the stage. These plays presented a sharp contrast to the melodrama that was prevalent in the Marathi theatre scene in the early 50's and 60's.¹⁵⁷ His career began with his first play in 1947, when he was in his 20's. The play *Gruhastha* (The Householder) was never really successful and he did not attempt to write again until 1956. Tendulkar's career has shown him to be not only prolific but also versatile, having written plays, short stories, film scripts, essays,

¹⁵³ Madeeha Gauhar, "Crossing Frontiers. Shared Concerns in Alternate Theatre". In *Crossing Boundaries*, (Ed.) Geeti Sen, Orient Longman Ltd, New Delhi, 1997, pp.251 - 252.
<http://books.google.co.uk>, accessed 21 April 2008

¹⁵⁴ The Star, May 31, 1984. <http://Ajoka.org.pk/Ajoka/jaloos.asp>, accessed 21 April, 2008

¹⁵⁵ Sarwat Ali, "Defying order of the day", *The News on Sunday*, 6 October 2002, Pakistan

¹⁵⁶ <http://www.mumbaiheatreguide.com/dramas/Articles/06/aug/10anji.asp>, accessed 25 April 2008

¹⁵⁷ Shanta Gokhale, <http://www.dnaindia.com/report.asp?newsid=4810&pageid=2>, accessed 25 April 2008

newspaper columns and a novel.¹⁵⁸ Tendulkar's plays are known for the presence of some intrinsic form of violence, be it domestic, political, sexual or communal. His 1972 play *Ghashiram Kotwal* (Ghasiram the Constable), a political satire based in 18th century Pune, employed traditional Marathi folk theatre techniques incorporated within a contemporary theatre form, thus creating a new paradigm for Marathi theatre.¹⁵⁹

Certainly some of Tendulkar's lesser known and discussed plays were imbued with wit and humour, attending to the same issues of modern urban life. One of these, *Anji*, is a serious yet witty tale of the protagonist Anji's quest for a husband. Originally written by Tendulkar using techniques of the Marathi traditional folk form *Tamasha*, *Anji* was re-invented by *Tehrik e Niswan* not just to contextualise it within a Pakistani-Muslim framework, but also to lend it a more familiar folk form, the *Nautanki*.

Narrative

Adapted in Urdu in 1985 by *Tehrik e Niswan* writer / director Khalid Ahmad, *Anji's* tale is set in Karachi where the 29-year-old protagonist Anji lives with her parents. Belonging to a middle class family she is the second of three sisters, the other two being married. Anji's parents have given up on the search for a husband for her, a task she has therefore delegated to herself in a very matter of fact, honest sort of way. She writes to marriage bureaus, meets young men that she is introduced to through common friends and family and travels to other cities to examine possible prospects. Anji holds a secretarial job in an office where she also has to face harassment in the workplace because she is single and the target of a lascivious colleague. Most of this information is implied through dialogue until we see Anji embarking upon a train journey to the city of Hyderabad to meet a prospective suitor. While the mission is unsuccessful, the journey back becomes promising when she meets Sammy, an "America-returned" single young man of Pakistani origin. Enamoured by his charms, she promises to meet him at his hotel in Karachi, especially since he is unattached. Her trusting nature does not allow her to see through his designs of taking advantage of her, while she torments herself about simply meeting him for a cup of tea. By the time she has mustered courage to go see him, Sammy has left for

¹⁵⁸ <http://www.dnaindia.com/report.asp?newsid=4810>, accessed 26 April 2008

¹⁵⁹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vijay_Tendulkar, accessed 26 April 2008

Lahore. Anji considers the chapter closed, disappointed because she actually liked him. Sammy however pursues her, calls her and persuades her to come to Lahore to visit him. Embarking upon another journey with the explanation to her parents that she is going to meet yet another possible suitor (which she justifies to herself as the honest truth), she sets off to meet Sammy. While Anji is keen to get to know Sammy and wants to explore the city with him, he is impatient to take advantage of her. He tolerates the sightseeing tour all day but loses his patience when he sees that Anji has no intention to stay the night with him. Forcing himself on her that night, he leaves her never to return. Anji returns to Karachi bitter, shocked and heartbroken, and ready to finally commit to a marriage proposal her sister has brought for her. The play ends when we see her debating whether she wants to live a married life like her sister, who has given up her own identity for the sake of her husband and children.¹⁶⁰

Stylistic concerns

This very serious narrative is made lighter by imbuing the play with witty dialogue and presenting it within the tradition of the *Nautanki*. While not adhering to the form in a rigid way, *Tehrik e Niswan* managed to borrow aspects of the *Nautanki* as well as other folk forms such as the *Yatra*. Keeping in mind that the original script was also given a similar format in the *Tamasha* form, *Tehrik e Niswan's Anji* replaces the Maharashtrian form with a North Indian one.

The *Tamasha* is a form of folk theatre of Maharashtra in central India. Modern *Tamasha* troupes consist of either the *song troupes* that specialise in song and dance entertainments, or the *folk drama troupes* that offer dramatic presentations. The *Tamasha* is characterised by several elements, such as the opening devotional song, traditional songs and dances and farcical skits. There is no restriction on the employment or the order of these elements but their content must include the comic and the romantic. The philosophical and aesthetic scheme of the *Tamasha* traditionally includes three categories, entertainment, propagandist and devotional. The *Tamasha* also has borrowed elements from other forms. The invocation song was probably an art of an older tradition and incorporated into the *Tamasha* as a natural transition. The Urdu songs and the *kathak* dance styles are directly descended from the Mughal

¹⁶⁰ Narrative and my commentary on the play are based on my study of *Anji's* video recording, from *Tehrik e Niswan's* documentation of plays. April 2008

influence. Musical instruments used in the *Tamasha* include the *dholki* (cylindrical two sided drum) and the *tuntuni* or a single stringed instrument plucked at regular intervals to produce a fixed note. The *manjira* and the tambourine are also commonly used. The *dholki* player works closely with the performers by interpreting or accentuating their performance through the rhythms he provides.¹⁶¹

Tehrik e Niswan's Anji also has similarities with certain forms belonging to other traditions such as the *Yatra* (tr. Journey), popular in Bengal and Orissa (India) and in Bangladesh. In *Yatra*, performances are based on written texts and composed mostly in prose, interspersed with a few lyrical passages. Of the musical instruments included in *Yatra*, the *dhol* (a double ended drum), the *mandira*, (a pair of small cup shaped instrument made of bell metal and played by striking one with the other), and the *harmonium*, are used commonly in *Tehrik e Niswan* productions. The content of the plays may be broadly defined into categories of Social, Historical and Mythological themes. Of these, the social category in which characters are drawn from contemporary society and are set in conflict on issues arising from values, principles, ideas of family and social life, are closest to *Anji's* style of presentation and other works from *Tehrik e Niswan's* repertoire. The main body of *Yatra* performances are composed of dialogical performance in prose, dialogical performance in lyric and song dance numbers.¹⁶² One of the few innovations that have been introduced to the traditional form of *Yatra* since the early 20th century is the introduction of the *Vivek* character, representing the conscience. The *Vivek* can appear anywhere in the narrative. He is usually a singer who comments on the action, externalises the characters' feelings, or puts questions to them.¹⁶³ The narrator-actor derives from traditional Sanskrit theatre. The *Vivek* could appear anytime in the narrative, stand apart and comment upon or question the dramatic action, sometimes assisting a character to articulate his inner conflicts. The *Vivek* who was outside the drama had greater freedom to be

¹⁶¹ Farley P. Richmond, Darius L. Swann, Phillip B. Zarrilli, (eds.), "The Folk-Popular Traditions", *Indian Theatre. Traditions of Performance*, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 1990, pp.275-304

¹⁶² Syed Jamil Ahmed, "Secular Performances" *Acinpakhi Infinity. Indigenous Theatre of Bangladesh*, The University Press, Dhaka, 2000, pp.245- 250

¹⁶³ Richmond Swann, Zarrilli, (eds.), *ibid*, p.243

able to sustain a significant role. The part is often played by veteran actors who can command the attention of the audience.¹⁶⁴

Kathryn Hansen describes the *Nautanki* form as traditional drama prevalent in the Hindi-Urdu speaking region of North India. Explaining it as a strong influence on Hindi drama, the *Nautanki* encompasses tales of romance, chivalry and adventure, using poetic meters and a strong emphasis on rhythm and rhyme. A singing style accompanied by musical instruments, particularly percussion is characteristic of this form that also encompasses dance, although to a lesser extent than the traditional forms of South India.¹⁶⁵

Previously known as *Svaang*, (the art of mimicry and impersonation) the word *Nautanki* emerged in the 20th century after the name of a heroine and the musical stage play that was based around her story. In the *Nautanki* form, music plays the most important part in communication, ranking above dance or acting techniques. It is a distinctive combination of singing and musical instruments and was traditionally performed outdoors in market areas, courtyards, or fairs. The *naubat*, or a processional ensemble was used to announce shows in the royal palaces or in the towns or villages before the commencement of a show. The *Nautanki's* sung text is made up of three styles: narrative, dialogue and lyric. Narrative and dialogue are used to carry the story forward and for clarity and comprehension, and any overlap between singers and instrumentalists is kept to a minimum. The poetic lines are delivered one by one in recitative style with the percussion and less audible instruments entering after each line is concluded. As soon as the singer finishes the line, the percussion plays in a regular rhythm cycle, usually 8 or 16 beats. The lyrical style on the other hand exhibits simultaneous accompaniment of recitation and music.¹⁶⁶

The *Nautanki* plays have a strong storyline taken from tales of the great epics, popular legends, historical events and contemporary society. The form is secular in spirit with its main aim being entertainment. The instruments used commonly in the *Nautanki* are the harmonium

¹⁶⁴ Kapila Vatsyayan, *Traditional Indian Theatre. Multiple Streams*, National Book Trust India, New Delhi, 1980, pp.145-146

¹⁶⁵ Kathryn Hansen, "Indian Folk Traditions and Modern Theatre", *Asian Folklore Studies*, Vol.42, No.1, Asian Folklore Studies Nanzan University, 1983, p.80

¹⁶⁶ Kathryn Hansen, *Grounds for play. The Nautanki Theatre of India*. University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford, 1992, pp.56-57, and pp. 208-215

and the *dholak*, a drum with two heads and played by the hands. The performance begins with an opening prayer, and depending on the audience, the theological language in them can be Hindu, Islamic or both. The structure of the plays in the *Nautanki* is very epic or narrative. The storyteller plays a central role in this form as well, verbally setting the scene and time of the action, introducing the characters and also at times indicating the moral that the play will illustrate. Music predominates the *Nautanki* performance but there is also dialogue between the songs. However these are a minor proportion to sung passages. The history of the *Nautanki* shows its borrowing from diverse elements to enhance its style. It has borrowed from tales of faith and devotion, stories of romance from the Arabic, Persian, and Rajhastani tradition, has adapted its form to political and social conditions and in its contemporary state, it has borrowed music and stories from films.¹⁶⁷

Even though *Anji* does not adhere strictly to the *Nautanki* form, many connections may be made within the play's format. The play works with a very definite musical ensemble, which not only aids the songs in the play but also marks the difference between scenes and projects emotions within a scene. The orchestra in *Anji* comprises of three musicians, playing the harmonium, the *sarangi* and the percussion *dhol*, specifically the *pakhawaj*. The tambourine is played by the *Raavi* or storyteller, when necessary. Very much in the beginning of the play before the narrative begins, the *Raavi* sets the tone of the play by inviting the actors to come on stage and pay their respects to the audience. While a traditional invocation usually addresses patron deities or God, this device is nevertheless an acknowledgment of the audience as the all-important patrons of the play. Some of these initial lines are recited in verse without music, in keeping with the poetic recitation tradition of the *Nautanki*. The play is then formally commenced by the *Raavi's* announcement, *Natak Shuru!*, (the play begins!), a feature that is used throughout the play between the scenes as the story unfolds. While music plays a more dominant role in the traditional *Nautanki*, *Anji* features an emphasis on dialogue, and music simply assists in moving the story forwards. The *Raavi's* announcement seeking a match for *Anji* is accompanied by a song based on the same theme, and includes the entire cast on stage.

¹⁶⁷ Richmond, Swann and Zarrilli, (eds.), *ibid*, pp.249-273

Anji is entirely conducted by a storyteller or the *Raavi*, who is accompanied by a group of musicians. Much like the *Vivek* in *Yatra*, the *Raavi* in *Anji* appears in the play at any time, playing the silent observer, the conductor of action (he plays the leader of this troupe of actors that is performing for the audience), or the facilitator of dramatic action, putting questions to Anji and to the other performers in the play. Anji's character is introduced to the audience through conversations with the *Raavi*, the wit and humour constantly alive when she in her bid to seek a husband she also asks him if he is married or unattached. He intervenes in a scene to defend Anji from her lecherous colleague at work, voices her fears and apprehensions when she is contemplating visiting Sammy, assists in changing properties on the set to suggest changes in locale and even plays Anji's messenger delivering her letter of absence at work when she decides to go to Lahore. He sings a romantic song as Anji dreams of being with Sammy in some fantastical landscape, and casts a spell on Anji's salacious colleague in the manner of a circus operator or magician. In keeping with the *Nautanki's* traditional format that does not support scene or act divisions¹⁶⁸, *Anji's* script is free flowing and devoid of definitive scene changes. The storyteller's role therefore is all-important in *Anji*, as he announces every scene and locale change and also assists in unfolding Anji's own thoughts and fears.

The visual aesthetics in *Anji* are also borrowed from the colourful characteristics of the folk traditions. The *Raavi* dons a traditional short shirt and straight pyjamas, with a turban-like headdress. Apart from him, the rest of the cast is dressed in very contemporary clothes, and rapid time and locale changes are suggested by simple changes in scarves or headdresses. The set properties are basic; a simple doorframe suggests Anji's house, Sammy's place as well as the train ticket office, a bench which serves doubly as a train compartment or Anji's living room, and a few varying sized multi functional boxes serve the play's simple and complicated requirements. A kitschy painted screen, (the painted panorama Brecht speaks of), suggesting a Mughal garden is brought in by two actors in Anji's dream sequence when she imagines herself with Sammy.

¹⁶⁸ Kathryn Hansen, "Indian Folk Traditions and Modern Theatre", *Asian Folklore Studies*, Vol.42, No.1, Asian Folklore Studies Nanzan University, 1983, p.82

Another interesting device that runs through the play is the actors' constant coming in and out of the dramatic action. Established very early in the play is the *Raavi's* assertion that everyone present on stage is an actor about to perform a play for the audience. The dramatic action is broken from time to time when actors do not appear on cue and are reprimanded by the *Raavi*. The *Raavi* asks one actor to replace a colleague who is late for a scene, and an entire scene is played towards the end of the play because the actor playing Anji's sister insists that everyone forgot her scene in the confusion of the interval. The interval serves as a time lapse after which Anji assists the *Raavi* in updating him about how the story has unfolded.

Tendulkar's underlying concern with social issues is taken up in a fairly direct manner at the end of the play when Anji shares her apprehensions about marrying a man and compromising her identity. Ironically the very process that Anji undertakes to make herself an attached dependant ultimately makes her aspire to be an independent woman. The question is taken up by the *Raavi* who addresses the audience directly and puts the question to the spectators. Inconclusive in the way Anji chooses her options, the play is actually a question mark left in the minds of the audience. A landmark in its style and content, *Tehrik e Niswan's* 1984 production of *Anji* established it as a serious and alternative theatre group very few years after its inception.

Let the Show begin!

The Evolvement and Practices of *Tehrik e Niswan* and *Ajoka*

TEHRIK E NISWAN

Life: So tell me, how do men and women live here?

Wind: The woman needs a house to protect her from dishonour. And the man needs someone to slave after him day and night. There is no better slave for him but the woman. So he agrees to this transaction in return for providing her with food and clothes and calls it marriage.

Life: And they can live their lives in a marriage like this?

Wind: Yes, somehow they can.

Life: I hear beautiful buildings are being constructed in this city now and that people collect here to relax, to laugh, to sing.

Wind: They seek respite in these momentary pleasures. But there is no respite. Who knows what the seat of power is made of.... Whoever sits on it loses his mind.

Life: What is the relationship between the rulers and the people? Are the people hard working?

Wind: Some are. But some don't move an inch and take credit for other peoples' hard work.

Life: Is there no justice in this city?

Wind: They say a *fatwa* was declared and Justice was branded a traitor and expelled from the city.

Life: So where is Justice now?

Wind: What can I say? You can't even find Justice in the courts. Maybe a little in someone's heart.

Life: And the writers?

Wind: They are there but cannot raise their voices. If they do, the people will expel them too.¹⁶⁹

This excerpt from *Tehrik e Niswan*'s first play signifies the group's concerns around women's rights from its very inception. Based on several stories by the Indian author Amrita Pritam, *Dard Kay Faaslay* (Distances of Pain) (DKF) is a tale of two characters, Life and Wind, who seek the earth to bestow gifts to five women. While Life appears more optimistic and

¹⁶⁹ Excerpt from original script *Dard Kay Faaslay* (Distances of Pain), based on short stories by Amrita Pritam, *Tehrik e Niswan*, Karachi, 1979 (approx.). My translation from Urdu.

unaware of the region she is visiting, Wind is more aware and hardened to the realities of human existence. The above excerpt is Wind's introduction to Life about how humans exist on earth. Throughout the play Life is more engaged with the women she meets while Wind acts as a commentator.

The encounters of Life and Wind with five women introduce us to the latter's respective issues, each symbolically representing concerns that women in the audience might relate to. We do not meet the first woman and are in fact told by Wind that she is locked in her house by her husband each morning as he leaves for work and is denied interaction with the outside world. Her house is spoken of as a place with no windows and with walls that are centuries old. The walls are symbolic of traditions and customs that imprison the woman. The second woman is seen picking coal from the railway track and is carrying an infant with her. Troubled by poverty and various problems that have left her husband unemployed and ailing, and her son imprisoned for a petty crime, she recounts how she was abused by a man who she trusted would give her husband a job. Defeated by hardships, she refuses to accept Life's gift for fear of being incriminated for it.

In complete contrast to the previous character, the third woman lives a life of extreme luxury provided to her by her husband; a candidate for the forthcoming elections. Her life of opulence is confined to her house, as she too speaks of being denied interaction with anyone outside her community. The symbolism sets in most through this character, who explains that her heart was replaced by a brick of gold when she got married. She too declines Life's gifts, upon her husband's instructions. The fourth character represents the dejected woman beaten by the adversities in her life. She speaks of abuse and rejection at the hands of men at a time when the country was newly born; possibly making reference to the Partition as a symbol of hope that is nevertheless overwhelmed by the tragedy that surrounded individuals then. This woman's life represents the continuous abuse women face at the hands of men who treat them as objects. Once again Life's gifts are declined by this character for fear of polluting them.

Our last protagonist is more a representation of that contemporary Pakistani woman who infuses her life with thought and seeks answers to life's questions through the arts. She is

shown as a painter, a songwriter and musician who has no human attachments, and considers herself as nobody's slave. She is the only one who acknowledges the presence of Life in her thoughts. This philosophical approach represents some measure of hope that allows her to think for the future. But her thoughts are private and unacceptable to the world, and for this reason, she can only accept Life's gifts in the ideal world that she awaits.

These encounters are interspersed by Wind's comments on how women are denied education particularly in the rural areas, and that marriage is mostly arranged and those women who dare to fall in love suffer at the hands of the community at large. Having met all five women and dejected with these encounters, we find Life commenting on an age bereft of any civilisation, depth or culture. The play however ends on a more optimistic note, when Wind reassures Life that the land is still fertile, and therefore holds promises of a more hopeful future.¹⁷⁰

***Tehrik e Niswan* - beginnings**

Dard Ke Faaslay (DKF) was performed by *Tehrik e Niswan* members in 1979, in a Karachi market place specially built for women. This venture was indeed a first for the members who were using this method of communication as an experiment to supplement their political activism. *Tehrik e Niswan* was founded by Sheema Kermani in 1979 in one of Karachi's low income community areas, Shershah. The establishment of an office came after a few years of voluntary service in several community areas in conjunction with trade union movements that Kermani worked closely with after she returned from the UK in 1972. Kermani's motivation to work with women specifically came about through her interaction with the trade union leaders and their need to draw in women factory workers into the movement. This was a time when the textile industry was fairly large in Karachi and women were employed in great numbers, making them a huge potential force. However the literacy level was immensely low amongst women, and they lacked confidence to speak for themselves or attend large trade union gatherings

¹⁷⁰ Summary of original script *Dard Kay Faaslay* (Distances of Pain), *Tehrik e Niswan*, Karachi, 1979 (approx.).

dominated by men. Kermani was supported by a few close female friends who worked together to make the women factory workers aware of their rights in the workplace.¹⁷¹

It was part of this campaign that ultimately led to the opening of an Adult Literacy Centre and later a self employment centre that assisted women in setting up small businesses by donating sewing machines to them. These ventures were largely funded by Kermani and her colleagues. While these activities were being conducted on a more or less individual basis, the need for the establishment of an organisation arose as voluntary activities stepped up and Kermani thought that the setting up of an office would offer the women a sense of ownership. In 1979, Kermani installed a board outside rented premises in Shershah and officially founded *Tehrik e Niswan*. This official start helped Kermani and her colleagues to initiate a membership system, whereby women of the locality paid a minimal One Rupee fee, while Kermani, her colleagues and newly inducted friends who supported their cause paid anything between Rs. 50/- to Rs. 100/-. This system of self-help and donations paid for the office rent as well as for teachers who were employed in the Adult Literacy Centre.

While their activism remained low key under the repressive conditions of Zia ul Haque's military regime, women of the communities were enthusiastic about perpetuating change in their lives. Kermani recalls a strong urge amongst all the political workers despite different affiliations, to respect each other's ideological beliefs and work towards a change.

As an extension to its activities, *Tehrik e Niswan* began to organise events such as seminars and conferences on the position of women in society, and poetry readings (*Mushaera*, or formal recitations of poetry in Urdu) that allowed to draw in women from various walks of life. Women from the communities were involved in participation at every level and many submitted their poems to *Tehrik e Niswan* for recitation at the *mushaeras*. This attention to literature also grew from the personal interest of *Tehrik e Niswan*'s core members as well as their supporters who included writers and political activists. Kermani recalls many an evening of such gatherings where friends would collect and read texts together. In an attempt to devise a means that would

¹⁷¹ Interview Sheema Kermani, *Tehrik e Niswan*, Karachi 14 February 2008. All information in this chapter is taken from this interview unless otherwise stated.

help promote women's potentials on the literary front, *Tehrik e Niswan* began looking at writings by women writers. It was one of such writings, *Dard Kay Faasley*, a compilation of short stories by the Indian author Amrita Pritam, which inspired the beginnings of *Tehrik e Niswan's* theatre activities. The script was compiled by Kermani and her friend, Doctor Kishwer, who was a close associate and shared her political outlook. Taking excerpts from several of Pritam's short stories, DKF was formed into a play for theatre. There was no particular reason to give this writing the shape of a play except the personal interest of *Tehrik e Niswan's* members in the arts and literature and an awareness of what was happening in the performing arts on an international level. Little did they realise that this humble venture would direct the movement in a new course altogether.

The first performance

It was upon the invitation of the owner of a newly built all women's marketplace, *Meena Bazaar*, in Karachi's Karimabad area that prompted Kermani and her colleagues to visit the place. The owner was looking for women entrepreneurs who would be interested in setting up small-scale businesses on the premises. Kermani's interest coincided with examining any possibilities as the place promised a surge of women visitors to this new bazaar. This influx of visitors in a not-completely-occupied building prompted the *Tehrik e Niswan* members to propose holding a play in one of the unoccupied spaces. The owner, keen to invite more visitors, agreed and the play was performed on one of the subsequent days. Despite the challenges that a public performance presented and the trepidation of embarking upon such a venture without any experience in theatre, the play was received very well. As Kermani says:

"It was actually quite wonderful. I think the surprise was different. It was so difficult, with babies and children and movement [...]. And also our own total lack of experience of how we will conduct this [...] experiment of doing a play there. But women actually sat down and watched it. It was their reaction that made us understand the whole situation".¹⁷²

¹⁷² Kermani, interview, *ibid*

The performance served as a turning point for *Tehrik e Niswan* members who began to rethink their approach towards their activism. The fact that two years of activism around conferences and seminars had not impacted the group's work as much as a single performance had managed was an eye opener. The encouraging response essentially led Kermani to believe that activism through performance was a necessary route to undertake.

The first proscenium production

The response DFK received in the marketplace performance inspired *Tehrik e Niswan* to consider taking it to the stage in 1980. The cast was revamped and two better-known television actors were inducted in the play. The spirit however was still very much in keeping with the cause so that the nature of the work remained largely voluntary. The venue chosen was the approximately 200 seat capacity auditorium on the premises of the Pak-American Cultural Council, popularly known as the PACC. Most of the assistance in the production work was volunteered, from music to lights to remuneration for the actors. The auditorium charged a minimal fee to support *Tehrik e Niswan's* cause and the gate fee was set at Rs. 33/- (which included 10% tax). Given that DFK was a short one-act play, *Tehrik e Niswan* members decided to perform it with a second short play. With a view to attract a wider range of people in the audience, this production was supported by a short play in English, "*But What Have You Done For Me Lately?*" by Myrna Lamb written and first produced in 1969. The narrative in "*But What Have You...*" is woven around a female surgeon who has operated on a man and made him artificially pregnant. Through role reversal, he is made to voice every imaginable argument in favour of abortion. Both intense and funny, it is a play propagating the right of women to choose abortion for undesired pregnancies.¹⁷³

DKF evolved as a production essentially from Kermani's and her friends' interest in theatre, as well as their awareness of the feminist movement in the USA and UK. Some members were writers and one particularly was an actor in the commercial theatre in Karachi in the late 70's. Her experience as well as the enthusiasm that prevailed because of the potential of the medium spurred the group into action. Compared to the pared down version suitable for a

¹⁷³ Sheema Kermani, Interview by e mail, 17 February 2008

public space, the version staged at the PACC was revised in many ways to incorporate concerns of a staged play. Recorded music was added to enhance the mood, a visual slide presentation interspersed the action, and the pre-recorded voice for Wind was distributed through speakers installed in different parts of the auditorium to evoke a three dimensional effect. New consideration was given to costumes and sets through consultation and feedback from visual artists who were friends and supporters of *Tehrik e Niswan*.¹⁷⁴

The staged version of DKF received some accolades as well as mixed responses. One review urges *Tehrik e Niswan* to consider the suitability of subject matter for a more informed audience and suggests the play is didactic in its approach.¹⁷⁵ Despite its mixed reviews in the press, the creative process was enough to motivate the groups to consider creating and producing more plays in the years to follow. Their next production for stage was a dance drama *Silsila e Roze o Shab*, (The Cycle of Day and Night) in 1982¹⁷⁶. The dance was supported by a short Urdu play *Aurat* (Woman), written in India by the renowned founder of the street theatre group *Janan Natya Manch*, Safdar Hashmi. This play had however shortly after DKF already made a place in *Tehrik e Niswan*'s repertoire as part of its community theatre plays. "So I would add that we started our theatre of agitation and propaganda [...] but from the beginning we have tried to raise it to a high artistic level. Along with this we have worked at both levels - reaching out to uninitiated audiences - both Urdu speaking and English speaking".¹⁷⁷

The growth of mobile theatre

The development of more plays for the communities began very shortly after DKF when political activists and trade union workers approached *Tehrik e Niswan* to bring plays in their areas. Word had spread about the success of the marketplace play and the trade unionists felt that a play would be a motivating force to draw women to their political meetings and engage in some form of political thought. *Tehrik e Niswan* developed a new play *Aurat*, for its community

¹⁷⁴ Sheema Kermani, interview, 24 February 2008

¹⁷⁵ Aban Marker, "2 Feminist Plays", *The STAR*, Thursday 31 December 1981, Karachi

¹⁷⁶ This title is borrowed from a line from Muhammad Iqbal's poem "Masjid e Qartabaa" (The Mosque of Cordoba), written in 1918

¹⁷⁷ Kermani, email interview, *ibid*.

audiences and performed it for the first time in the office of a labourers' federation, the *Mutahidda Mazdoor Federation* (United Labourers' Federation) in the early 80's.

Aurat

The development of *Aurat* came about when Kermani's writer friend Ahmed Kaleem brought her a script from India, written in Hindi, which he described as a very revolutionary play.

"You will obey your father and mother in law.

You will consider your husband your lord.

You will feed him first and yourself later!

You will not utter a word if your husband or in-laws are cruel to you.

You will look after the house and the hearth".

"Do you accept? Do you accept all this?"

"She accepts! She accepts!" ¹⁷⁸

Aurat shows various instances of oppression in the lives of women. A single actor plays each representation of a woman's life, from childhood to old age. Stylistically, the various scenes are woven together through songs and the storyteller's commentary on the narrative as it progresses. The storyteller remains a link between the audience and the play, projecting both viewpoints. At this point, more formal concerns were being considered by *Tehrik e Niswan*, and *Aurat* was informed by various influences of *Nautanki*, local and folk traditions, and Asian traditions of story telling and dance. This along with more local knowledge of plays and films helped structure the play into an interesting interplay of dialogue, narration and stylised movements. The young *Tehrik e Niswan* was supported by veteran theatre director Ali Ahmed of NATAK (mentioned in previous chapters) who not only lent his valuable advice, but also inducted actors from his group for this play. ¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁸ Translation from *Aurat, Tehrik e Niswan*, Karachi

¹⁷⁹ Kermani, interview, 24 February 2008

The play runs through the diverse roles a woman plays in her life, from a little girl who is deprived of education in favour of her brother, to a bride when she pledges to serve her husband unconditionally. She is then shown as a young student trying to survive through college and university despite facing discrimination in the college (women are not allowed to go to the canteen, she is told) and harassment on the streets as she travels to college each day. She is seen as the educated girl who cannot find a job and finally as an old factory worker who has no security from her employers. Despite the difficult circumstances it projects, the play ends on an inspiring note with the woman rising from the dust.

Interestingly, when *Aurat* was brought to Kermani, no one in Karachi was aware of who had originally written the play in India. Hashmi was not that well known in his country at the time and his affiliation with the Communist Party India (Marxist) had led him to go into hiding for brief period. In fact even when the production was staged in 1982, it was suggested that the play had been written by group of people in India. Even before it was staged at the PACC, the popularity of this play is evident in the fact that *Aurat* has been performed over a hundred times in communities since.

Aurat is also a play that has received volatile responses from the audiences, because of the place or the situation under which it was performed. Kermani recalls one such performance in 1983 at the Karachi University, organised by the Pakistan Students' Federation (PSF) during which the air was rife with tension because of PSF'S rivalry with a right wing students' group. While both groups remained armed with guns throughout the performance, waiting for any excuse to start a confrontation, the actors were subjected to harassment as the rival student wing continued to throw letters on the stage which read that if a man and woman would appear on stage together, they would be fired upon. While no untoward incident occurred, it is still vividly recalled by the actors. In another more recent incident, (date possibly 1999 or 2000) *Aurat* was taken to a low-income area called Orangi. (Located near the peripheries of the city, Orangi is the largest unplanned settlement in Karachi since 1965, and is home to immigrant groups from India, Bangladesh, the Punjab, and Northern areas of Pakistan. It chiefly consists

primarily of second and third generation migrants from India).¹⁸⁰ The host had invited *Tehrik e Niswan* to perform in a local school but became apprehensive when he learnt that the clerics of the area were going to attend the play and may cause trouble. While the play went on, the clerics remained seated in the audience but continued to read their newspapers without engaging with the play. Whether it was to show disdain or to demonstrate their presence in the area, the performance certainly became a cause for concern for both the actors as well as the organisers.

Early plays and finances

The early 80's were still a time when *Tehrik e Niswan* was operating on an ad hoc basis, with the group meeting up to share its interest in literature and no written policy defining its agenda. The next play, a series of three short stories by a recently deceased women's writer, *Khirman, Daag and Teen Aurtein*, was devised simply as a memorial for the author Khadija Mastoor, on the suggestion of her sister Hajra Masroor, also a close associate of the group. The play was staged in July 1983 at a recently formed Hashoo Auditorium, previously a cinema house. By this time the organisation had structured itself informally and Sheema's personal address and phone number was used for all correspondence and contact. The previous plays at the PACC had caught the attention of the media and the short stories were received with some anticipation. Finances however were still on a donation basis and the capacity of individuals to support the organisation. Contributions paid for the office infrastructure and the few necessary salaries. Performances in communities were upon invitation and no fee was charged. It was only after the short story plays (*Khirman, Daag and Teen Aurtein*) that *Tehrik e Niswan* began to consider paying some of its actors who would otherwise not have been able to cope with the demands of the profession. This money came in through private invitations for performances by organisations. The first of these was the Pakistan Montessori Association for which *Tehrik e Niswan* charged a fee for performance. This money enabled the group to pay some of its professional actors.

¹⁸⁰ *Tehrik e Niswan Mobile Theatre Report*, Quarter II, yr I, Apr-June 2000

This was also the time when a new and vital member was added to *Tehrik e Niswan*. Khalid Ahmad, an electrical engineer by training and a professor at a local engineering university shared his interest in theatre and literature with the group. Recently returned from the USA after obtaining his degree, he acted in and directed many of *Tehrik e Niswan*'s subsequent plays until he and Kermani parted ways in the late 90's. Under Ahmad's direction and adaptation, *Tehrik e Niswan* saw a surge of successful plays that established it as a formidable and dynamic theatre group.

While *Tehrik e Niswan* managed a new production annually in this decade, the one that received most attention was the adaptation of Indian writer Vijay Tendulkar's Marathi play, *Anji* in 1985. Adapted from a Hindi translation of the play, and directed by Ahmad, the play is a serious yet comic tale of a single woman's endeavour to find herself a husband. Employing a mixture of theatrical folk traditions from a mixture of Indian traditions, *Anji* uses music, and storytelling methods in the *Nautanki* style to lend it a rich form both in content and visual appeal.

The 80's helped formulate a defined structure for *Tehrik e Niswan*'s formal theatre practices, allowing it to create at least one new production a year. For most of these productions, the support lent by the performance space organisers by deferring the hall rent fee and minimal gate fees helped lessen the financial burden on the group, which sustained itself through voluntary work by the members and allowed it to pay a minimal performance fee to its actors.

AJOKA THEATRE

Inception and early years

Ajoka theatre was founded by Madeeha Gauhar in 1984 in Lahore, as a response to General Zia ul Haque's military regime. The daughter of an army official, Madeeha's theatre experience began in her student days at school and later the Kinnaird College where she was president of the dramatic society and later the secretary of the Government College dramatic society. One of her earliest directional ventures was in 1975 when she worked on a play on apartheid for the

Foreign Students' Association at the Punjab University. This along with a production of *The House of Bernado Alba* in the same year fed into the making of *Ajoka* in the years to come.

By the early 80's, upon completing her college education, Gauhar had become a member of the Women's Action Forum, (WAF) where her political activism against Zia ul Haque's laws against women led her to subsequently lose her teaching post at a women's college and also to get arrested and jailed twice. As part of WAF, in which her sister and mother were also actively involved, she participated in performing small plays or "skits" as she calls them, for the various events arranged by the organisation. Interestingly, Gauhar recalls one of the earliest complete plays that she performed for WAF in 1983 to be *Tehrik e Niswan's Dard Ke Faasley*, the script of which was given to her by a WAF member.¹⁸¹ It is an interesting coincidence that both the seminal theatre groups of Pakistan not only began their careers with the same play, but also with literally the same script. However since *Ajoka* had not been founded formally even by this time, DKF cannot be marked as its first play.

Gauhar describes her associations with WAF, the Anti Zia Movement and the Movement for the Restoration of Democracy as "random happenings" that led to the formation of the *Ajoka* theatre group. A combination of the country's political events, her increasing politicising of thought, her disaffection with television (a medium she had been acting for since her college days) because it had become a mouthpiece for the Zia regime and its ideology, and her recent graduation from the Government College which left her without a space to conduct theatre activities (the GC despite its strict measures did offer its students a space to perform), led Gauhar to think of alternative ways to create her own space. Her associations with various performers in the past years yielded a group of people who shared similar interests and became initial members of *Ajoka* in 1984.

The first performances

Gauhar's frequent visits to India to visit her grandfather in Gujarat and en route trips to Delhi allowed her to meet theatre practitioners including Badal Sircar and study his methodology.

¹⁸¹ Interview Madeeha Gauhar, *Ajoka Theatre*, Lahore 26 February 2008. All information in this chapter is taken from this interview unless otherwise stated.

She acquired a Hindi version of Sircar's play *Michhil* (tr. Procession) on one such trip and this became the basis of *Ajoka's* first play *Jaloos* (Procession). Inspired by Sircar and all the theatre activity Gauhar had seen in India, she returned to a group of enthusiastic friends and ex Government College students to form a group that aspired to continue performing after graduation. Lacking a rehearsal space, they began working in the lawns of Gauhar's mother's residence, which ultimately became the centre of most of *Ajoka's* early theatre activities. The stringent censorship laws of Zia ul Haque's regime made it impossible to perform in any public space and the group ultimately decided to perform *Jaloos* in the outdoor lawn space of the Gauhar residence.

Gauhar writes about the beginnings of *Ajoka* amidst Zia ul Haque's stringent policies and her choice of *Jaloos*:

"The emergence of *Ajoka* and other such theatre groups was an inevitable response to this attempt to stifle the creativity and silence the voices of the Pakistani people. *Ajoka's* first production was Badal Sircar's *Jaloos*. A play about the political exploitation and betrayal of the masses by political and religious leaders, written in the context of Western Bengal, it appeared to be as relevant to the Pakistan of the early eighties. I had met Badal Sircar in Delhi in 1982 [...]. This was my first encounter with Third Theatre. This experience gave me insight of the work being done in India and proved to be a major inspiration [...]. When *Ajoka* started looking for its first script, *Jaloos* was the obvious choice. "¹⁸²

Despite its low profile, the play attracted a reasonable audience, and also caught the attention of the Special Branch, which kept *Ajoka's* activities under scrutiny. Madeeha recalls the circumstances well as she talks about the impossibility of finding a theatre hall, government owned or private, for the play. Given the imposition of Section 144 in the country, which banned a congregation of more than four people, there was no possibility of performing in an open

¹⁸² Madeeha Gauhar, "Crossing Frontiers. Shared Concerns in Alternate Theatre". In *Crossing Boundaries*, Ed. Geeti Sen, Orient Longman Ltd, New Delhi, 1997, p.251. <http://books.google.co.uk>, accessed 21 April 2008

space. The play was advertised through word of mouth, and ultimately a sizeable amount of people congregated for the play. This also unfortunately attracted the attention of the Agencies, who questioned the visitors and noted their vehicle registration numbers.¹⁸³

The following play, *Panjwaan Chiragh*, (tr. The Fifth Lamp, language: Punjabi) was written and directed by fellow members of *Ajoka*, Sarmad Sehbai and Salman Shahid respectively, at the same venue. This play seems to have disappeared from *Ajoka's* repertoire, and there is no record of its script or documentation.

This was also the time when Madeeha went away to the UK to pursue her Master's degree. She returned for a brief period at the end of 1985 to work on a new production, the adaptation of Brecht's *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, *Chaak Chakkar*. (CC). For this play, Gauhar had acquired a script that had been adapted earlier by Badal Sircar.

CC also established the beginning of *Ajoka's* long and enduring relationship with the Goethe Institute in Lahore. In the absence of any performing space, *Ajoka's* association with the Goethe Institute lent it not only infrastructural facilities but also a certain protection from the watchful Special Branch and Agencies and their censorship laws.

A small terrace on the Goethe Institute's premises became the permanent performing space of *Ajoka* for many years until they built a permanent stage on the location some years later. Apart from this and a storage space The Goethe Institute lent *Ajoka* all the institutional support needed to put up its productions. This support however did not include financial means, which were still a concern for the group. Most of the work was still being conducted on a voluntary basis and gate fee was free. Gauhar recounts that only two productions were financially supported by the Goethe Institute because they were adaptations of Brecht (*Mangal Pur Ka Naik Insaan*, an adaptation of *The Good Person of Schezwan* in 1988, and *Bala King*, an adaptation of the Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui in 1998). These two productions were also

¹⁸³ Gauhar, *ibid*, p.252

collaborative in nature, with directional or design input by professionals brought in by the Goethe Institute from Germany.

After the performance of CC, Gauhar went back to the UK to complete her studies and the group continued its work. A dance drama *Yahan Se Shehr Ko Dekho* (Look at the City from Here) based on the story of four women in prison was performed in 1986 in Karachi after being denied permission to perform in Lahore. The dance drama was directed by Madeeha Gauhar's sister Feryal Gauhar and performed on the occasion of the Golden Jubilee of the Progressive Writers' Association.

1987 marked the addition of Shahid Nadeem in *Ajoka* Theatre, who has since written original scripts as well as adapting many a plays for the repertoire. The presence of a permanent writer in the group who contributed original scripts made the productions more swift compared to *Tehrik e Niswan*, and Nadeem's inclusion remains an important part of *Ajoka* Theatre's character till today. Nadeem's own political activism began in the students' movement against the military dictator General Ayub Khan, which resulted in his overthrow in 1969. He wrote two plays *The Dead Dog* and *The Third Knock* and also initiated a theatre group coincidentally by the name of *Ajoka* but before the latter play could be staged as the premier production of this group, the 1971 East Pakistan crisis erupted, leaving Nadeem's plans unfulfilled. Fourteen years later he met Madeeha Gauhar who recalled his script *The Dead Dog* and asked him to write for her anti establishment theatre. This offer marked the beginning of Nadeem's long and enduring relationship as writer and later director with *Ajoka*. Nadeem was imprisoned in 1969, 70 and 78 for his writings and his opposition to military rule. He was adopted as prisoner of conscience by Amnesty International and worked in London for Amnesty International as the international campaign coordinator while he was in exile.¹⁸⁴ In fact Nadeem re wrote Sircar's version of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* some years later to adapt it to a more local context and *Ajoka* performed the new version in the early 90's. Nadeem's first play for *Ajoka* was *Barri* (The Acquittal) in 1987. The play was directed by Madeeha Gauhar and first performed on International Women's Day in 1987.

¹⁸⁴ Shahid Nadeem, *Selected Plays*. Oxford University Press, Karachi, 2008, pp.xxvii-xxviii

“Shahid Nadeem wrote the play when he was in exile in London after being imprisoned by the military government of General Zia-ul-Haque. The play refers to the oppressive and discriminatory laws introduced by General Zia-ul-Haque’s military regime in 1983, which under the cover of Islamic reform, took away many of the rights which had been won by women after a prolonged struggle”.¹⁸⁵

The story of four women unjustly imprisoned for various reasons, *Barri* is described in a review as a “relentless” play that “examines the sickness and violence in our society”.

“The prison in which four women find themselves is a metaphor for this entire country where women are denied the most fundamental rights, where minorities are persecuted; and where the innocent can be jailed for years without redress. But over and beyond this general, almost random, brutalisation, half our population is subjected to daily horrors on a casual, routine that is seldom even questioned or criticized except by a handful educated and dedicated women.”¹⁸⁶

Shahid Nadeem’s inclusion in the theatre group yielded many original productions in the first decade of *Ajoka*. Most plays were based on issues pertinent to the political climate of Pakistan, and remain relevant even to this day. In 1988, apart from the adaptation of Brecht’s *Good Person...* *Ajoka* performed two more plays. *Steve Biko Ka Muqaddama*, (The Trial of Steve Biko) based on the trial of Steve Biko was performed on the occasion of Nelson Mandela’s 70th birthday, and *Itt* (Brick), which was written and directed by Nadeem. A list of prominent plays written by Nadeem roughly during the first decade would include, *Jaloos* (1984), *Itt* (1988), *Marya Hoya Kutta* (The Dead Dog, Language: Punjabi, 1987), *Choolha* (The Stove, 1989), *Jhalli Kithay Jawey* (Where Should the Mad Woman Go? Language: Punjabi, 1990), *Dekh Tamasha Chalta Bunn* (Watch the Show and Move On, 1992).

¹⁸⁵ <http://Ajoka.org.pk/Ajoka/barri.asp>, accessed 17 April 2008

¹⁸⁶ The Nation, April 08, 1987, as seen on <http://Ajoka.org.pk/Ajoka/barri.asp>, accessed 17 April 2008

Marya Hoya Kutta (1987) revolves around the issues and concerns of an inner city neighbourhood where a dead dog is found lying in the street one morning, causing a stench and inconvenience to the inhabitants of the street. While no one is willing to dispose the corpse, people in the street squabble about its disposal. They wake up in the middle of the night by a ferocious stench, and discover that the body has disappeared but the stench is ever present. While arguments prevail and people blame each other for the cause of the stench, the local cleric distributes incense sticks to the people to protect their immediate surroundings while the stench continues to prevail. A play that urges audiences to come out of its stupor and engage in a more responsible and active role in society, *Marya Hoya Kutta* was performed in Peshawar in the late 80's. It is also mentioned on *Ajoka's* website as Shahid Nadeem's first play written in 1971, but performed by *Ajoka* in 1987.¹⁸⁷

Choolah, (1989) was a prominent play based on the issue of stove deaths, a problem that was although rampant in the rural areas, little discussed or acknowledged. The play raises the startling issue of stove deaths, suicides or pre meditated murders disguised as suicides, rampant in the rural areas within the domestic situation. While the actual stove death occurs off stage in a neighbourhood house as the play begins, its becomes the source of discussion in the protagonist's house, a woman who is deeply entrenched in a stifling domestic situation, and is oppressed by her husband and mother in law. The death and the discussions that follow enable the protagonist to ultimately challenge her husband and find an identity for herself.¹⁸⁸

Dekh Tamasha Chalta Bunn (1992) raises issues of religious intolerance and challenges the blasphemy laws that were promoted by Zia ul Haque's regime. This play was written by Nadeem while he was in Hong Kong working for Amnesty International, and was very apt at the time because of the marginalizing of minorities through these laws.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁷ <http://Ajoka.org.pk/Ajoka/mhk.asp>, accessed 20 April 2008

¹⁸⁸ <http://Ajoka.org.pk/Ajoka/choolah.asp>, accessed 20 April 2008

¹⁸⁹ Interview Madeeha Gauhar, *Ajoka Theatre*, Lahore 26 February 2008

Development of an ideology

The theatre activities evolved along with the development of an ideology that formed the basis of *Ajoka*. While Gauhar maintains that no formal process was held to formulate this, everyone in the group shared a similar belief system for a secular and democratic Pakistan, and this translated itself into the performances that were being conducted. Despite the restrictive censorship laws of Zia ul Haque's regime, there was a huge sense of optimism that prevailed amongst the people, willing to fight adversity and take on challenges of the times. While there was no formal written agenda, rudimentary principals are mentioned on *Ajoka's* early production brochures, stating what they believed in and what they hoped to change in the social system.

Apart from political ideology, *Ajoka* also formulated from a very early stage the kind of theatre it wished to propagate, using traditional forms and elements in the plays very consciously. The first time this was enunciated was with their second production *Chaak Chakkar*. Gauhar's own MA research helped her to clearly formulate not only her dissertation but also create a guideline for *Ajoka's* agenda later. Her MA dissertation discussed the relegation of traditional folk forms in theatre in the region to the peripheries with the growing influence of western theatre traditions. Her study into the history of theatre in the subcontinent drew her to IPTA's conscious use of traditional forms in reaction to the western methods of the then prevalent Parsi theatre tradition. This and the discovery of works by Indian directors like Habib Tanveer assisted in formulating methods that would incorporate traditional folk forms in subsequent plays by *Ajoka*. Gauhar states the development of theatre traditions at the National School of Drama in India in the 70's to have had a great impact on the sensibility of the Indian theatrical tradition. While in the 60's the impetus at the NSD was very much on the western traditions, it was in the 70's when a director from the Berlin Ensemble worked with the students and drew from traditional forms, that it made an impact on the form of contemporary Indian theatre. The awareness of this change and the study of Brecht in her student days steered Gauhar towards methods that became a strong direction for *Ajoka* as it developed.

Community Theatre

Ajoka's community theatre activities ran parallel to its urban theatre productions. Given that in the 80's there was no organised system to facilitate this in terms of NGOs that would conduct such theatre based activities in various areas, the experience for *Ajoka* was quite sporadic and upon invitation of random charity organisations that worked in Lahore or in the rural areas of Punjab. *Ajoka's* first experience of community theatre was a performance for the All Pakistan Women's Association (APWA), which invited the group to perform a play from its repertoire *Jhalli Kithay Javey* (Where Should the Mad Woman Go?) in five villages around Lahore (approx 1990). In the absence of any organisational structure, *Ajoka* found itself in a position whereby it had to collect audiences for each play and thereby face the adversity of apprehension and even violence in some of the communities it visited. It was received with mistrust in some places and at one occasion, its actors were also beaten up for "misguiding" the people. Essentially the lack of ground support from APWA also came from its own lack of experience in the field because, as Gauhar recalls, it was not a grassroots organisation and its lack of contact with the community did not allow its workers to engage with the community with any awareness raising approach. This left *Ajoka* to venture upon unknown territory and manage the dynamics of facing a new community each time by itself.

While finances for such tours were minimal, and supported transport to and from the areas, it was *Ajoka's* spirit of enthusiasm in such ventures that lent it the driving force. For *Ajoka* it was an exciting venture to reach out to audiences beyond the urban scenario, and also a chance to perform its plays more often. It was this spirit that encouraged it to take on such work organised by other organisations as well.

One such organisation, a group of paralegal workers from the office of the well-known Pakistani human rights lawyer Asma Jehangir, invited *Ajoka* to perform in villages around Lahore. Gauhar recalls that the project involved no money at all and also found that the paralegal workers themselves were not well entrenched within the community. Given that the organisation had been working on the issue of women's rights in divorce, *Ajoka* devised a small skit and performed it in the villages, only to be taken to task in a particular venue for

“misguiding the women”. Gauhar also recounts that some women from the audience approached *Ajoka* to seek advice on divorce matters, a matter which was further taken up by the paralegal workers.

Ajoka’s experience of working outside the urban theatre realm was not confined to such experiences. It had in the past performed at political events and rallies held by like-minded organisations that shared its political beliefs. These organisations were not NGO related or charity based. Rather they were political organisations and *Ajoka* performed for them as a gesture of solidarity, totally free of cost. These ventures took *Ajoka* to far and wide places across Pakistan, from areas within the Punjab to Peshawar in the North West Frontier. Gauhar recounts that even at that time, there was a tangible difference in the audience in these rallies and political events, because the people in these communities, belonging to the Labour Movement or the farmers’ organisations, were very politicised themselves and the level of connection was very dynamic and alive. This politically aware audience helped create a very charged atmosphere in most such situations, very different from the communities they visited through the above-mentioned organisations, and even later to the communities they visited through organised NGOs.

The plays that *Ajoka* took to the political events or to the communities by invitation were part of its existing repertoire. These were not specifically designed for any event and since most issues covered in the plays were around a social and political debate, the relevance for each was quite apt. Popular plays for the community audience included *Jaloos* (1984), *Itt* (1988), *Marya Hoya Kutta* (The Dead Dog, Language: Punjabi, 1987), *Choolha* (The Stove, 1989), *Jhalli Kithay Jawey* (Where Should the Mad Woman Go? 1990), and *Dekh Tamasha Chalta Bunn* (Watch the Show and Move On, 1992), which was extensively performed for the Christian community through various organisations outside Lahore. According to Gauhar, it was only on one later occasion in 1995 that *Ajoka* wrote and produced a play on Family Planning, commissioned by the Family Planning Association of Pakistan. *Jum Jum Jeevay Jamman Pura* (Long Live Jamman Pura, 1995) was also later translated into a play for television.

In concluding this chapter, I reiterate the importance of the political beliefs that informed the work of both *Ajoka* and *Tehrik e Niswan* throughout the years since their inception. Supported by the enthusiasm of their followers in the form of audiences or activists, the work they produced was a result of their own convictions in hostile political environments that were nevertheless charged with optimism to bring about social and political change. Whether they played to workers' rallies or middle class theatre audiences, the common thread was the presence of a belief system that informed the narratives they performed.

CHAPTER 4

Theorising Practice

In this chapter I discuss Brecht's theories through Augusto Boal, who situates Brecht between Aristotle's coercive functions of Greek tragedy that aim to make the spectator passive and perpetuate his inability to *act*, and Boal's own *Poetics of the Oppressed* which are clear indications of his belief that the spectator must become the actor in order to relinquish his passive role. Examining Aristotle's view of the tragedy being a repressive function that is suitable for the purging of all anti social sentiments in the spectator through the process of catharsis, Boal suggests that these functions in fact render the spectator unable to engage in the act of reflection. Boal's introduction of Brecht's views form the transitory stage between Aristotle's system and his own. While Aristotle's system aims for equilibrium after the performance, Brecht sees the theatrical spectacle to be the beginning of action, claiming that the equilibrium that is sought should be towards transforming the society, and not towards purging the individual of his just demands and needs. I later introduce Boal as a means to introduce his techniques employed by the theatre groups in the Development agenda in chapter 6. In discussing both Aristotle and Brecht, the underlying link is that of the imagination which is employed by the spectator to perceive the world in a certain way. In the context of contemporary society, the role of the imagination has taken on a collective form and become a part of everyday life. In this context I discuss Arjun Appadurai's argument of the role of the imagination as a social force in today's world. In Appadurai's examination of how we imagine the world in a mediatised world and the role imagination plays in our construction of the world, I argue that the circulation of culture and representations is global, and that the role of the imagination opens up many possibilities for responses by the spectator.

In discussing Aristotle's system, or the *poetics of oppression* as Boal titles it, and then Brecht's view which according to Boal is the *preparation for action*, I aim to highlight the role of both *Tehrik e Niswan* and *Ajoka* whose plays encourage critical thinking. While neither group has in any sustained manner practiced participatory or interactive theatre, their plays nevertheless have been a means for reflection and discussion in the communities that they have been taken to. Brecht's influence on both groups is evident in their selection of his texts for productions and their employment of strategies that remove the illusory aspect of a play to engage the spectator more actively. I approach Brecht *through* Boal because he positions Brecht between Aristotle and his own strategies of engaging a spectator more actively in an action, an approach that is employed readily by the practitioners of the theatre groups under the NGO umbrella discussed later. I choose Paulo Freire to analyse *Ajoka's* play in this chapter because of Freire's views of encouraging dialogue and reflection. I examine the play through Freire's *theory of conscientization*, which sees development to be more than just economic progress, productivity or class

struggle. Freire's theories also influenced Boal's work, who then incorporated them into his revolutionary theatre practices. Boal and Freire both belong to Brazil and their concerns are similar to those in other lesser-developed countries like Pakistan. Both theorists argue that in order to emancipate the oppressed it is essential to make them part of a dialogue that allows them to critically reflect upon their conditions.

To support this argument, I have for this discussion selected one play from the repertoire of each group to make connections with Brecht's stylistic concerns and Freire's theory of conscientization.

Tehrik e Niswan's Aglay Janam Mohay Bitya Na Keejo (In my Next Life Do Not Let Me Be Born a Daughter), (1994) narrates the story of a young girl in a lower middle class family, who suffers discrimination at the hands of her family for being born a girl, and pays a heavy price for seeking some harmless entertainment.

Ajoka's Kala Menda Bhes (Black is my Robe) (1996) is set in a small village in the Cholistan desert in Pakistan where the inhabitants are being exploited by a "*Pir*" (tr. a spiritual guide, a holy man), who has control of the well; the only source of water in the village. Interwoven in the narrative is the real life event based on a news story of a woman who is exchanged for an ox.

The repressive function of tragedy

Augusto Boal describes Greek tragedy as a system that encourages the population (of a city) to be uniformly passive about inequalities it may suffer in its living experience. This statement makes a direct reference to Aristotle's *Poetics*, in which the most fundamental aspect of tragedy is its *repressive function*. While many other aesthetic aspects of tragedy are acknowledged by Boal, the repressive function bears most relevance to this argument because according to Aristotle, the most important aspect of the tragedy is to provoke *catharsis*.¹⁹⁰

To understand what role catharsis plays in this argument, we must first recognise what catharsis aims to purge in an audience. To further his argument, Boal uses Jacob Bernays' interpretation of the term 'catharsis' through a medical metaphor. Bernays' theory uses an analogy describing catharsis to bear a pathological effect on the soul, like the effect of medicine on the body. Using Aristotle's definition of the tragedy as the "imitation of human actions that excite pity and fear", Bernays suggests that the spectacle *temporarily* suppresses feelings that are evoked through it, and may not only perpetuate the purgation of emotions like pity and fear, but also of certain socially forbidden instincts. In questioning why these two emotions bear so much meaning in this argument, Boal finds through an analysis of tragic characters that pity and fear bear little importance to the characters themselves. Here the argument becomes clearer when Boal reveals that pity and fear do not manifest through the tragic characters, but rather through the *spectators*. Thus we understand that the spectators are linked to the heroes through the emotions of pity and fear, because, according to Aristotle, something undeserved happens to a character that resembles us and allows us to relate to it through our lives. According to Boal, Aristotle argues that man seeks happiness through the maximum virtue, which is the obedience to the laws. When he fails in his actions, tragedy intervenes to correct this failure. People must be purged of the impurities within them because they threaten their own equilibrium as well as that of society. These extraneous elements within man are a social fault and must be removed. Hence tragedy intercedes through catharsis to remove these undesirable elements from man.¹⁹¹

¹⁹⁰ Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, Translated from the Spanish, Charles A, Maria Oilia Leal Mc Bride, Pluto Press, London, 1998, p.25

¹⁹¹ *ibid*, pp. 28-32

Boal explains the functioning of Aristotle's *coercive system of tragedy*. From the moment a spectacle begins, a relationship is formed between the protagonist and the spectator, who lives through the stage actions of the character through his imagination, assuming a passive attitude and delegating the power of action to the character. Boal argues that this kind of *empathy* is not just experienced with tragic characters, but also through popular mediums of communication like films or television. This empathetic relationship between the character and the spectator is based on the emotions of pity and fear but also encompasses other emotions such as love, hate or desire. In Aristotle's coercive system of tragedy, the spectator establishes an empathy with the protagonist (or hero) when the action begins. However the hero develops a tragic flaw in his character, which incidentally is also responsible for his present state of happiness. Since the spectator empathises with the protagonist, he also recollects and reactivates a similar flaw in himself. The character runs the risk of ruination through the tragic flaw he possesses and faces a *drastic change in his destiny*. The spectator also experiences a fear of his ruination simultaneously. At this point it is likely that the spectator who has been empathising with the character, disassociates himself from the character. The tragic character according to Aristotle must recognise his tragic flaw through *reasoning* hoping that the spectator will do the same. However, because the spectator has the advantage of detaching himself he must come to realise that the tragic flaw must have tragic consequences and must accept his own tragic flaws in actuality. In order for this to occur, Aristotle demands that the tragedy ends in a *catastrophe*; a terrible end that causes the destruction of the tragic character. These three stages - *drastic change in the character's destiny*, *recognition of his flaw through reasoning*, and *catastrophe* all aim to provoke catharsis. Terrified by the spectacle of the catastrophe, the spectator is purified of his flaw.¹⁹²

Boal argues that Aristotle's coercive system of tragedy serves as a powerful system of intimidation and survives to this day. This powerful purgative system aims to eliminate all anti social elements. Boal reiterates that the system appears in disguised forms on television, in the movies and in the theatres. He describes empathy as "the most dangerous weapon in the entire

¹⁹² *ibid*, pp. 34-37

arsenal of the theatre and related arts (movies and TV)".¹⁹³ Empathy constructs a relationship between two characters in two universes; one real and one fictitious. Through this emotion, the real character surrenders his decision making power to the fictitious character. The danger that lies within this system is that the spectator relates to the fictitious universe as real and incorporates these elements in his self. While the fictitious character makes a decision, it is in an unreal situation, detached from the complications of life. When the spectator experiences this fiction and incorporates those elements in his self, he accepts this as reality. This phenomenon is described by Boal as *Aesthetic Osmosis*.¹⁹⁴

Boal clearly sees Aristotle's purgative system as one that is aimed towards eliminating all that was unacceptable. "His system appears in disguised form on television, in the movies, [...] in the theatres. [...] But its essence does not change: it is designed to bridle the individual, to adjust him to what pre- exists."¹⁹⁵ If indeed, he claims, this is what we want, then the Aristotelian system serves the purpose very well. However, if on the contrary we wish to inspire the spectator to transform his society, we must look elsewhere towards another form of poetics, different from that offered by Aristotle.¹⁹⁶

The Role of Imagination

In discussing the effects of Aristotle's definition of tragedy and its evocation of emotions such as pity and fear in the spectators, we understand that the underlying implication in this manner of thinking is that it is reached by the spectators through their imagination. It is through their imagination that the spectators or the audience link themselves to the action, relate it to their lives and allow it to influence their perceptions. It is also through the imagination that the role of tragedy manifests itself and the spectators allow it to intercede and remove what Aristotle calls "the undesirable elements". Boal's critique of the coercive aspects of Aristotle's system of tragedy lies in the fact that when in an action a relationship is formulated between the protagonist and the spectator, the spectator actually lives vicariously through the action, through an imagined participation, delegating all power of thinking and action to the protagonist. In a

¹⁹³ *ibid*, p.113

¹⁹⁴ *ibid*

¹⁹⁵ *ibid*, p.47

¹⁹⁶ *ibid*

more contemporary context Boal finds the imagination to be manipulated in similar ways through media such as television or films. The danger of delegating power to a fictitious character or situation lies in the fact that the spectator imagines this universe to be real and incorporates the unreality of the action in himself.

The role of the imagination in Brecht's theory of theatre is invoked in the way he wishes his spectators to take charge of the action through critical thinking, arousing a capacity of action. For this Brecht uses devices that create a distance between the spectator and audience and enhance the unreality of the action on the stage. By deliberately inserting the notion of the action as unreal, Brecht aims to take the spectator's imagination into a different realm; one that evokes critical thinking through the action on stage. Brecht's theory aims to equip the spectator with agency by the alienation he creates through his methods.

The role of the imagination changes in the contemporary context when it is influenced by global cultural flows. Arjun Appadurai discusses how the imagination becomes part of ordinary life through these influences. With migrations and mediatisation, we find the imagination to take on the role of a social practice and adapt the characteristic of a collective form. Whereas on an individual level, the spectator may construe his imagination through fantasy, a collective imagination allows the sharing of aspirations, of imagining things collectively and bears the power of agency and action. Whereas fantasy can dissipate, the imagination bears the potential to imbue the individual with agency. Whereas the role of the imagination does contribute towards the construction of imagined selves or imagined worlds, it has become an everyday aspect of ordinary life, rather than something that adheres to myths, rituals or art. In a new global order, where shifts and changes are constantly occurring, imagination becomes a key component, influencing the way a theatre production for instance is received. The shared set of collectives that the imagination inspires bring about new powers of perceptions in the spectator be it in a visual representation of an idea or a theatre production, allowing the work to be open to a diverse set of responses.

The world we live in today is characterised by a new role for the imagination in social life. Here, global cultural flows influence the way imagination is constructed and the world is perceived. In the global circulation of culture and representations, the imagination becomes a field of social practices through a range of influences.

In defining the core link between globalisation and the modern, Arjun Appadurai finds media and migration to have a joint effect on the work of the imagination. He examines globalisation through the forces of electronic mediation and migration and shows how the imagination works as a social force in today's world. With the incorporation of the electronic media, the entire field of mass mediation is now transformed and media now offers new disciplines and resources for the construction of imagined selves and imagined worlds. Because of the multiplicity of the forms in which they appear, and the rapid way in which they move through daily lives, electronic media provide resources for self-imaging as an everyday project. Similarly, as mass migrations create diasporic public spheres, and moving images interact with deterritorialised viewers, both mass migration and electronic mediation drive the work of the imagination and define the core link between globalisation and the modern.

The imagination plays a significant role in the post-electronic world because it has broken out of the special expressive space of art, myth and ritual and has become a part of the ordinary logic of life. Ordinary people now have begun to position their imaginations in the practice of daily life. Here, the mutual relationship of mediation and motion is evident in the growing rates of migration where people move and take their imagination to new ways of living along with them. Images, scripts and narratives that come through mass mediation impact mass migrations today as people who have moved, or wish to move or stay, largely formulate their plans within the scope of radio, television, newsprint or electronic communication. When mass media is consumed throughout the world, it is capable of provoking resistance, irony and agency. Whether it is a terrorist modelling himself upon media projected Rambo-like figures, or housewives following soap operas to construct their own lives, these are all examples of the way in which images of the media are moved into local repertoires of irony, anger, humour and resistance. Compared to fantasy which can dissipate, the imagination has a projective sense

about it and when in its collective form, can become fuel for action. It is in this collective form that the imagination can create ideas of neighbourhood, nationhood, or unjust rule, and stage a ground for action. In this way, the mass media also makes possible a collective sense of the imagination, a group that begins to imagine and feel things together. Collective experiences of the mass media create sodalities and communities, which are capable of moving shared imagination to collective action, and often operate beyond the boundaries of the nation.¹⁹⁷

To understand the world we live in today that is characterised by a new role for the imagination in social life, Appadurai brings together the ideas of *images*, *imagined community* and the *imaginary*, as a landscape of collective aspirations. These terms direct us to understand the imagination as a social practice, where it has become a field of social practices, a form of work, and a form of negotiation between fields of agency and globally defined fields of possibility. Through this we understand the imagination to be central to all forms of agency and a key component of the new global order.¹⁹⁸

Appadurai constructs five dimensions of global cultural flows that serve as building blocks for what he calls “imagined worlds” or multiple worlds that are composed by the historically situated imaginations of people or groups spread around the world. These dimensions are termed as ethnoscapes, technoscapes, financescapes, mediascapes and ideoscapes. He constructs these to understand the complexity of the global cultural economy which he describes as a disjunctive order. Ethnoscapen define the landscape of people who constitute the shifting world as tourists, migrants, refugees, exiles and workers. Whether these people deal with the reality of moving or with the fantasy of wanting to move, these realities and fantasies now work on very large dimensions and with the swift change in policies regarding refugees, or with the generation of different needs through technology, these people move with their imaginations and imagined worlds with an equally swift pace. Similarly technoscapes determine the global configuration of technology that now moves at high speed across previously impervious boundaries. Financescapes represent the complicated and rapid

¹⁹⁷ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large. Cultural Dimensions of Globalisation*, Public Worlds Volume 1, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, London, 1996, pp.3-8

¹⁹⁸ Appadurai, *ibid*, p. 31

landscape of global capital as large sums of money are moved through stock exchanges, commodity speculations and currency markets. Through mediascapes we understand the distribution of electronic capabilities to produce, disseminate information and to the images of the world created by the media. Mediascapes provide a complex array of images and narratives to people across the world in which the world of commodities and of news are mixed so that audiences across the world experience the media as a mixture of interconnected print, celluloid, electronic screen and billboards. The divide between reality and fiction is blurred so that the further the audience is from the metropolitan experiences, the more likely it is to construct its imagined worlds.

Ideoscapes are linked images, often political and connected to the ideologies of the state or counter ideologies of movements clearly orientated to capturing state power. Constructed within the master narrative of the Enlightenment, ideoscapes consist of a chain of ideas, terms and images such as freedom, welfare, rights, representation and democracy. Because of the different implications of these words as they are read in different parts of the world, they bear a range of meanings according to their contextual conventions. As these terms are read, heard or seen in varied ways they shape themselves in a range of ways in national and transnational contexts. This creates a diversity in these terminologies as the ethnoscapings of populations remain in constant motion and are influenced by the mediascapes within which they are presented. Hence current global flows occur in and through disjunctures among ethnoscapings, mediascapes, financescapes, technoscapes and ideoscapes and through their sheer speed, scale and volume these disjunctures become central to the politics of global culture.

With the movement of populations, deterritorialisation becomes one of the central forces of the modern world. With this comes the creation of new markets for film companies or travel agencies that thrive on the need of the deterritorialised population for contact with its homeland. This results in the creation of invented or imagined homelands, which compose the mediascapes of the deterritorialised people. Within ethnoscapings, sentiments, (which bear the ability to turn locality into a staging ground for identity), have become extended, as large groups

of people move and yet stay linked through the media. Hence ethnicity has now become a global force.

While the globalisation of culture does not mean its homogenisation, globalisation employs instruments of homogenisation (such as language, fashion, advertising techniques) that are taken into the political and cultural economies, and are then also sent back as heterogeneous dialogues of national sovereignty and free enterprise. The central feature of global culture today is that both sameness and difference contest each other on a stage that is characterised by the disjunctures between different sorts of global flows and the uncertain landscapes that are created in and through these disjunctures.¹⁹⁹

Underlying this discussion therefore is the imperative need to understand the opening up of the role of the imagination and the acknowledgement of the diverse and constantly moving influences that have allowed for its formulation. In acknowledging that the circulation of culture and its representations is global, we can understand the implications of audience response in a more informed way. I now return to the Brecht's theory of theatre and his aim to empower his spectator by his specific methods of alienation as employed in a play by *Tehrik e Niswan*, using the imagination to evoke critical thinking and subsequent action.

Aglay Janam Mohay Bitya Na Keejo (AJ) – Tehrik e Niswan

Narrative

The narrative of *AJ* draws contrasts between the lives of Samina and her younger brother Iqbal, both born in a lower middle class family. While Samina yearns to receive the same treatment as Iqbal, she is accepting of her fate, and recognises this as her role. As a child, she helps Iqbal with his homework, even though she is denied an education in favour of her brother and is ordered around by her mother to do everything to make his life comfortable. Iqbal grows up as an arrogant chauvinist, considering this special treatment to be his birthright. He enjoys the freedom to do as he pleases and goes about the city with his friends. Samina has a couple of friends who spend time at each other's homes, simply yearning for the freedom the boys enjoy.

¹⁹⁹ Appadurai, *ibid*, pp.32-43

There are frequent references in their conversations about Farhat, a neighbour whose mother and sisters are in fact independent, move about the city in buses, and are considered too “forward” by the community. The matter comes to a head when the girls overhear the boys planning an outing and Ayesha, the boldest amongst Samina’s group, goads the other two girls to at least consider an outing.

(Boys)

Friend 3: Let’s go to the cricket match. There’s a fantastic match between (Australia) and (Pakistan). I went yesterday. The stadium was thronged with people. Supporters bring flags of both countries. When the Australians bowl, their supporters cheer from this side. When the Pakistanis bowl, their supporters cheer from the other side. Yesterday it was so crazy people fell into the ground. Nearly broke into a fight.

Friend 2: Yeah. Why don’t you just go to the match by yourself?

Iqbal: No forget the cricket match. Let’s go to the movies.

Friend 1: No. To Seaview.²⁰⁰

Friend 2: The movies.

Friend 3: Fine. Let’s toss.

Iqbal: Fine.

Friend 2: Yes, but remember. We’ll have to do what the toss decides.

(They toss). Heads Movies, Tails Seaview).

²⁰⁰ One of the sea-side areas in Karachi is called Sea View

Friend 1: Oh no! What's this then?

Friend 2: Oh Oh.

Friend 3: How did this happen?

Iqbal: Let me see.

Friend 2: No no.

(The boys laugh loudly and leave. The girls, who have been listening in on the conversation in the adjoining room, sigh helplessly).

(Girls)

Ayesha: Come on, let's go *somewhere*.

Samina: Where?

Ayesha: Let's go to Farhat's house. We can watch a video there.

Zubeda: No no. Not there.

Samina: If someone at home finds out, all hell will break loose.

Ayesha: Why are you always afraid of that?

Zubeda: Afraid of that! No Samina. Don't you go there.

Ayesha: Well let's go somewhere. Anywhere.

Zubeda: Where?

Ayesha: Let's go to the sea side. Or to the movies.

Samina: We're going to get clobbered for that.

Ayesha: So what? Take a few blows.

Zubeda: We'll be kicked out of our homes.

Ayesha: That's a perfect plan. What better a thing to happen than that! We'll be free finally.

Zubeda: You know how bad things are in the city these days. Girls can get kidnapped.

Samina: Listen, I'll ask Iqbal. Maybe he can take us to the movies one day. He might agree if he's in a good mood.

Ayesha: I'll also ask my brother.

Zubeda: I'm not going to get permission.

Samina: Silly girl. At least ask them.

Ayesha: Well, do you want to go or not?

(Zubeda nods)

Ayesha: Then ask them. Will you? Promise?²⁰¹

²⁰¹ Excerpt from original script *Aglay Janam Mohay Bitya Na Keejo* (In my Next Life Do Not Let Me Be Born a Daughter), *Tehrik e Niswan*, Karachi, 1994. My translation from Urdu.

Samina musters up the courage to ask Iqbal to take the girls out for a movie. Not only does he brush her aside, (the cinema is not a place for girls, he says), but also reprimands her for spending time with these girls who are a bad influence on her. With the plan failed, the girls decide to venture on their own, without informing their families. They encounter harassment in the bus and en route to the cinema. They finally arrive late at the cinema hall and take their seats in darkness, in front of a row of lewd boys for whom the movie hall suddenly becomes a more interesting place. The boys pass bawdy remarks while the girls shuffle uncomfortably in their seats. Suddenly one of the boys leans forward and says something suggestive in Samina's ear, at which she is horrified and shocked. We find as events proceed that it is not what was said to her that upsets her so immensely but rather the recognition of who said it. For Samina realises that the suggestive remark whispered in her ear has been said by her brother Iqbal. She is too upset to stay and decides to leave before Iqbal realises who is sitting in the front row. Thinking she is unhappy about the treatment meted out by the boys, her friends decide to leave the movie hall and venture home. The return journey is not as simple as they anticipate. It is raining and there are no buses or taxis. Finally a taxi stops but breaks down soon after the girls begin their journey home. The grumpy taxi driver asks them to get off and curses their parents for allowing them to leave home unescorted. Meanwhile as it gets later in the evening, the girls begin to get frantic, anticipating terrible treatment when they get home. Stranded in a neighbourhood they consider calling home for help and ask around if they may be allowed to use the phone. None of people in the area are helpful. The girls abandon their plan and finally much later in the evening, arrive home. Samina faces humiliation at the hands of her community and neighbours when she gets home. Worse still, Iqbal confronts her with attacks on her person. She tries to intercede, wanting him to stop before he says something that will force her to retaliate, but he is unstoppable. Samina's last resort is to pick up a stone and hit him hard so that he stops his attacks. The repercussions of this episode result in further restrictions on her, and she is locked in the house each time her family is not at home. The story ends on a positive note when the narrator of the story and his friends sing a song about freedom and liberation to help Samina break the shackles of her confinement.²⁰²

²⁰² Original script *Aglay Janam Mohay Bitya Na Keejo* (In my Next Life Do Not Let Me Be Born a Daughter), *Tehrik e Niswan*, Karachi, 1994. Narrative and my analysis from original script.

Stylistic concerns in *AJ* and Brecht's distancing technique

From the very beginning *AJ*'s narrative is not presented in a linear manner. The story unfolds through an interaction with a team of actors led by a director or a *Raavi* (narrator), who is keen to present a play to the audience amidst strong resistance from his actors. The actors are tired of the *Raavi*'s sermon-like plays and want to present a light-hearted play. While devising an alternate story, they hear Samina's voice from her locked room. Henceforth, their presence and interaction with Samina takes her character in a different time and space parallel to her own narrative and she moves between the two worlds with relative ease. Despite being locked, they help her to come out of her captivity and coax her to tell them her story. Evidently, the lock in Samina's narrative is very real, but in the *Raavi*'s and actors' narrative, its presence is symbolic, since they help her in and out of her room without assuming it to be an obstruction. She acknowledges their presence and re enacts her story with the actors' and the *Raavi*'s help.

Girl: Get me inside! Quick!

Actor 4: There's nothing to be afraid of.

Girl: Who are you people?

Actor 4: They are all our companions. Yes. They'll help you to tell your story. They're our friends. This gentleman is the *Raavi* (narrator). Ever since he was a child, he loved telling stories, just like you. This is why he became a narrator.

Actor 1: He used to like singing but could not make it as a singer. But that's another story.

Raavi: So shall we start?

Girl: Where from?

Raavi: From the beginning.

Girl: From the very beginning?

Raavi: Yes. From the very beginning.

Girl: Right. So the very first scene. When I was born.

(All actors create a scene showing celebration, congratulating each other.

Music in the background. One actor plays the mother).

Girl: Hey hey hey. What are you people doing? This is all wrong! You really don't know anything about drama!

Actor 4: Why? What is the matter?

Girl: This is not the scene for my birth! This is the scene for my brother Iqbal's birth!

Actor 3: Oh. What happened when you were born?

Girl: Gather here. I'll explain.

(All actors gather around the girl. She whispers in their ears and the actors separate, crying loudly, mourning. One actor becomes the father, and some actors console him).

Raavi: So how long did this carry on?

Girl: Till Iqbal was born.²⁰³

²⁰³ Excerpt from original script *Aglay Janam Mohay Bitya Na Keejo* (In my Next Life Do Not Let Me Be Born a Daughter), *Tehrik e Niswan*, Karachi, 1994. My translation from Urdu.

Elizabeth Wright asserts that in Brecht's theatre, the audience is constantly drawn towards "a critical and inquiring attitude by the continual emphasis on the fictional status of the theatrical enterprise". At no point is the audience allowed to forget that it is sitting in the theatre and not viewing a real situation. At the same time it must not be allowed to bring in the same set of expectations related to real life situations. This allows the spectator to replace his passive attitude with a more active and productive approach, which allows him to perceive the action critically.²⁰⁴ This attitude is encouraged continuously in *AJ* where the presence of the outer framework of the *Raavi* and his actors remind the audience constantly that they are enacting a narrative.

Raavi: What? What did you say?

Actor 2: Um...no Sir...nothing Sir. I was just saying that these people are here to watch a play. If we keep singing songs, they might get bored and start hooting.

Raavi: Nonsense! These people will not jeer at us. Do you understand? They've just applauded after the song. They have good taste. You people are just jealous. That's all there is to it.

Actor 4: No Sir, we don't mean that. We were just saying that perhaps we should sing the rest of the songs a little later.

Raavi: Ah, I see. Very well, let's start the play then. Come on, take your positions.

Throughout the action we realise that the outer framework of actors is here to perform a play for the audience. The actors' resistance to the *Raavi's* slogan mongering plays turn their attention to Samina who is watching them from her locked room. They find her story more interesting and decide to help her relate it. Apart from Samina's character that remains constant in the narrative, all the other characters in the play, including Iqbal's, are drawn from the group

²⁰⁴ Elizabeth Wright, *Postmodern Brecht. A Re-Presentation*. Routledge, London and New York, 1989, p. 24

of actors when needed. This is not just visually evident, but is also emphasised in a “scene” when Samina wants to introduce her friends Ayesha and Zubeda.

Raavi: Fine, fine. But let’s come to the real story. That episode.

Samina: Yes, I’m doing that. Send those two here.
(Points at two actors in the group. They join her).
 You can be Ayesha. And you, Zubeda.

Actor 1: Your friends.

Samina: Yes. I’m going to be sitting here crying. You will come to my house and console me.

Actor 2: But why are you crying?

Samina: Goodness. You people are really crazy. I’ve just gotten hell from my mother. What would I do? Laugh?

(Samina sits with her head down, crying. The two actors approach her)

Actor 1: Samina?

Actor 2: Samina, what’s the matter?

(Samina lifts her head, looks at them and shouts angrily)

Samina: What! Are you people mad? You’ve come without wearing a *chaadar*! Will Zubeda and Ayesha go about like this?? Go. Wear a *chaadar* and come back!

(Both actors move away to bring chaadars)

Actor 1: How tiresome!

Actor 2: A *chaadar* in such hot weather. And such thick fabric!

Samina: Ha! Just you wait. I'm going to make you wear the veil as well. Then you'll see!

In Brecht's non-Aristotelian theatre, a new way of seeing is devised, in which the stage is re functioned. The stage is constructed to suggest a space in progress as compared to a traditional stage with ready-made constructions. Wright suggests that the first condition for the V-effect is that the stage is deprived of anything that is magical and creates "hypnotic fields". A series of artistic devices must be used to neutralise any tendencies in the audience to submit their power to the dramatic action. The stage set must provoke an active interpretation regarding its function from the audience. Whatever props are used must not be part of a realistic background, but as objects that are to be acted upon or with. Brecht even advocates the replacement of the heavy curtain with one that does not entirely close off the stage from the audience. In fact sometimes no curtain is used at all, and the traditional notion of the stage as the fourth wall beyond which the audience was permitted to cast a voyeuristic look, is replaced by a device that does not create that manner of separation. Hence the relationship between the stage and the audience is emphasised as they participate equally in the production of the text, allowing the spectator to remain aware of the real world and perceive the text in the light of the stage events.²⁰⁵

In this respect the fluidity of the framework of *AJ* assists in establishing the V-effect. The play properties consist of two light benches and a doorframe, which are constantly used and reused within the narrative in different ways. The benches suggest the interior of Samina's room, and double as the bus, the cinema hall, the taxi and a range of similar locales through the play. The doorframe becomes the cinema ticket office, the bus conductor's space and the separating device between the girls' and boys' room. Swift shuffling of the props between the events of the play, and an active acknowledgement of the action are a continuous reminder to

²⁰⁵ Wright, *ibid*, pp.26-27

the audience that they are watching a play. In mobile performances of this production, there is never any formal curtain and the stage is assembled with its props as the audience settles down. In fact the audience sees the actors first assembling the stage, then acting as the *Raavi's* actors in the outer framework and then taking roles within the narrative as required. This tiered framework possibly assists in convincing the audience of the contrast between real life and stage events. As Wright aptly puts it in discussing Brecht's distancing theory, that it is not only to do with the art of the actor, but also the art of the spectator.²⁰⁶

Similar devices of distancing are used in *Ajoka's Kala Menda Bhes (KMB)* and affirm the use of this technique.

Kala Menda Bhes (Black is My Robe) (KMB) – Ajoka

Narrative

The story is set in the desert of the Cholistan region, in a small village (The Dry Village) where water is a scarcity and the only well is controlled by a pseudo religious leader (here known as the *Pir*) who runs a shrine and practically controls the lives of the villagers. He sells water to the villagers in return for a hefty sum and sells his blessings to them in the guise of amulets. The illiterate population reveres him deeply and considers his word as divine. The story is told by two narrators Gama and Rukka, who act as commentators and move the story forward.

We are introduced to the background of the main characters through the initial narrators' repartee. The story begins on the day of Allah Vasaya's (AV) second marriage to Sohni, because his first wife Sundri cannot bear him a child. While the conflict between the two wives is evident and made humorous through their encounters, we see AV at the *Pir's* shrine waiting for his blessings so that his second wife may bear him a child. Sohni has brought a bull with her in her dowry, not only elevating her status but also enhancing her husband's financial prospects. While AV had been getting a paltry sum from the *Pir* for collecting water from the well, he now has the prospect of bringing water from the neighbouring village in larger quantities and selling it at cheaper rates to the villagers. This is seen as a threat by the *Pir* who tries to

²⁰⁶ Wright, *ibid*, p.26

convince AV to leave the bull at the shrine for its own protection. AV's reluctance results in the *Pir* scheming against him and he gives AV a poisoned amulet for the animal as a "blessing".

We also meet another villager Ditta, who has come to the *Pir* for an amulet for his ailing wife. He tells the *Pir* that he is striving very hard to dig a new well so that there may be water for the villagers but he is reprimanded by the *Pir* for thinking of such grand ideas. Another character that emerges in the narrative is the black robed foreigner, or *Ophra* (tr. Outsider) who is a mysterious figure to all as he shares his words of wisdom with the villagers and tells them to fight for their own freedom rather than be the *Pir*'s slaves. This character flows in and out of the story and may be perceived as the inner voice, or the voice of truth.

Just as AV's fortunes begin to shine, we find that his buffalo has died, (because of the poisoning, unknown to AV or the villagers). At the same time we see Ditta mourning the death of his ailing wife. While both AV and Ditta come to share their grief with the *Pir*, AV is told by the *Pir* that his bull died because he disobeyed him and did not leave it at the shrine. With the bull gone and no obvious source of income to support both his wives, AV is in a quandary. To his rescue comes the Maasi (aunt), or the local troublemaker who has the perfect solution to both AV's and Ditta's problems. She suggests that AV should take Ditta's bull, for which he has no use and exchange it for AV's first wife Sundri, for whom AV has no use. This way AV will have a means of income, and Ditta will have someone to look after and feed his children. The prospect is agreeable to all except Sundri who curses the entire lot for their vile schemes, but has no other way to react than to ultimately succumb. Sundri finds her life at Ditta's more peaceful, free from the conflicts with a cheeky second wife, and free of the humiliation she suffers at the hands of a cold-hearted husband each day. She finds Ditta a warm and genuine person and they strike a bond. Sundri encourages him to pursue his dream of finding a new well in the area.

Ditta's new quest for the well is seen again as a threat by the *Pir* who discourages him from the task and tells him to "first quench his soul's thirst". So trusting are the villagers of the *Pir*, that Ditta is nearly convinced. But this is the point when Ophra convinces Ditta to think otherwise, and questions the *Pir*'s motivations. Renewed with this support, Ditta continues his

quest with the help of the villagers. Meanwhile Ophra's presence is a challenge to the *Pir* as he is inspiring the villagers to think. The *Pir* sends his cronies to seek some incriminating evidence against Ophra. The *Pir's* vile nature is seen also in a sequence when AV brings his wife to the shrine for some amulet that may bless her with a baby. The *Pir* insists that this will not be an easy task and AV must leave his wife at the shrine for the night to participate in the rituals. The naïve AV agrees and Sohni is drugged and taken advantage of by the *Pir* in this period. AV takes his wife back in the morning and leaves his new bull behind at the shrine as part of the agreement.

The plight of the villagers seems like it has come to an end when Ditta finally discovers a well. He is delighted and the villagers share the joy at the prospect of a better future free of the *Pir's* control. However the *Pir*, who is still revered by all, jumps on the occasion and says that he had a revelation the previous night and was told that his shrine's well (which was drying up) has been transferred to a new location and that it was in fact the same well that Ditta had discovered. He warns the villagers against God's wrath if they touch this well without permission and he lays claim to the new discovery. Frightened and helpless, the villagers do nothing but succumb. Ditta does not give up his fight however and returns to reclaim his discovery only to be attacked and killed by the *Pir's* cronies.

Sundri charges into the *Pir's* shrine and accuses him of Ditta's murder in front of the villagers. Ophra supports the accusation but finds that the *Pir* accuses him of the same instead and reveals to the villagers that Ophra in fact is an absconding murderer. Although the villagers do not believe this initially and ask Ophra to clear his name, they find that Ophra does in fact have a criminal background. He explains how in a fit of rage he had murdered his wife in the name of honour and now repents by going from village to village helping people find justice. However he denies killing Ditta and blames the *Pir* for this. A woman who was an eyewitness to the murder and incriminates the two cronies, supports his claim. The villagers, encouraged by Ophra's presence finally blame the *Pir* for his misdoings, which had affected them all personally in one way or another, and chase him and his cronies away.

The finale of the story finds the villagers happy to be relieved of the *Pir*, and to be owners of a new well. They ask Sundri to claim the well since it was her husband Ditta who died for its cause, but she prefers to share it with the villagers. At this point a policeman arrives looking for an absconding murderer in a black robe, but the villagers deny knowing him. In fact they incriminate the *Pir* for his crimes instead but the policeman refuses to hear such blasphemy and leaves. The villagers discover that Ophra has disappeared as mysteriously as he had appeared and has left his black robe behind for them. Sundri takes the robe and covers herself with it, possibly symbolising her role as the voice of justice and truth for the villagers.²⁰⁷

Kala Menda Bhes (KMB) and Brecht's theory of theatre

In Brecht's model of epic theatre the old characteristic qualities of building suspense, luring the audience into a subjective state of identification and then creating emotional release is replaced by the stage beginning to narrate, comment and criticise from a point of view that is not necessarily connected to the immediate action. In order to emphasise the productive nature of the text, Brecht uses *narrative distance* in his technique of writing, staging, acting and directing. Not only does the actor, performance or text change its form, but the audience is also expected to change its attitude in perceiving the play. The technique of constant interruption of the narrative enables to create a distance between the stage and the audience, and the stage becomes the fictionality of life.²⁰⁸

In *KMB* the two narrators constantly engage the audience in a sort of commentary on the narrative whereby not only moving the events forward but also lending their analysis of the situation and establishing an outsider point of view. They establish from the very beginning that they are the storytellers of a tale set in their own village. This allows them the freedom to move in and out of the narrative as inhabitants of the village or pure storytellers. The two narrators, Gama and Rukka lend comic relief to the play and their quick banter puts them in a separate framework from the characters of the story. Their opening exchange helps create the initial mood and pace of the story ahead.

²⁰⁷ *Kala Menda Bhes*, (Black is My Robe), *Ajoka Theatre*, Lahore, 1996. Excerpt of play from DVD recording, Narrative and my analysis from original script.

²⁰⁸ Wright, *ibid*, p.31

Gama: Here it is well-wishers! You've just seen a spectacle like one at a fair!

Rukka: Ha – a – a!

Gama: Friends! I've just told you that Allah Vasaya has gotten married again and is sitting at the *Pir's* shrine. Well-wishers, let's see what colours the second marriage shows us henceforth. Come, let us all together show you this in the form of a *Swaang*²⁰⁹
Oye Rukka!

Rukka: Ye – e – e – s – s!!

Gama: See how happy Allah Vasaya is

Rukka: He's just gotten married again. He's bound to be happy!

Gama: That's super. A new bride and with her a brand new bull!

Rukka: Once the baby is born, then...

Gama: Ha ha! Silly man! How can the bull have a baby?

Rukka: Wives have babies, brother Gama!

Gama: Sigh! Allah Vasaya's first wife is a nice person, but she is not destined to have children.

Rukka: But Gama!

Gama: Yessss!

²⁰⁹ The *Swaang* is a folk form of theatre. Both the narrators are original practitioners of the *Swaang* from the Potohar region and work with *Ajoka* for this play given that their original folk form is now practically diminished.

- Rukka: If Sundri could bear Allah Vasaya's child, what need would he have to bear the expenses of a second marriage?
- Gama: Yes this is true.
- Rukka: Yes.
- Gama: But still. He may have spent money, but he has certainly gotten a lot of stuff from her dowry! And to add to that a healthy robust wife and a bull!
- Rukka: Oh Friend. One can find wives, but a strong bull is hard to find these days.
- Gama: I say. You've become very wise! Speaking words of wisdom! Absolutely right you are!
See, to work in the fields...
- Rukka: It's the bull that comes in handy!
- Gama: To cart goods and bring them home....
- Rukka: That too, the bull comes in handy.
- Gama: To bring huge containers of water from the neighbouring settlements back to your village.....
- Rukka: Gama brother! Who else but the bull is handy after all!
- Gama: Excellent! Excellent! Rukka! Allah Vasay's fortune is shining! He's sure to be happy.

Rukka: But poor Sundri seems a bit out of sorts.

Gama: Stupid man! Crazy fool! Think before you speak! If someone brought a second wife on your head, would you dance for joy?

Rukka: But Gama brother. I'm not even married yet!

Gama: Aah behold friends! The likes of this one want to get married!

Rukka: What?

Gama: No no. I mean..... come along. Lets discuss your marriage.²¹⁰

Kala Menda Bhes (KMB) and Paulo Freire's theory of conscientization

Freire's theory of conscientization sees development to be more than just economic progress, productivity or class struggle. He emphasises values, ethics and a fullness of life to define the essence of development. "Authentic development is a process whereby through an intense process of learning, characterised by the twin elements of *action* and *reflection*, the oppressed as a class confront and overcome the culture of domination and create meaningful alternatives for their own future".²¹¹

Paulo Freire, whose theory of conscientization deeply influenced the work of Augusto Boal and became integral to the development of his Theatre of the Oppressed, argues that in order for the oppressed to regain their humanity and for their struggle to have meaning, they must become the restorers of the humanity of *both themselves as well as their oppressors*. The task that lies ahead of the oppressed is to liberate themselves and their oppressors. However, he contends that in the initial stages of such a struggle, there is a strong possibility that the oppressed will become oppressors themselves, because their thoughts have been conditioned,

²¹⁰ *Kala Menda Bhes*, *ibid*, my translation from Seraiki.

²¹¹ Jacob Srampickal, *Voice to the Voiceless. The Power of People's Theatre in India*, Hurst & Company, London, and St. Martin's Press, New York, 1994, p.6

and “in a moment of their existential experience, they adopt an attitude of adhesion to the oppressor”. This does not mean that the oppressed are unable to perceive that they are exploited. It is simply that their perception of themselves as opposite to the oppressors is not yet significant enough for them to engage in a struggle to overcome this repression. The oppressed therefore suffer from a duality which becomes embedded in their beings. They are aware that without liberation they cannot exist truly and yet, they aspire not towards liberation but to identification with the oppressor. They face the contradictions of following prescribed rules or having choices, of being *spectators* or *actors*, of speaking out or being silent. This dilemma sees the oppressed as powerless in their ability to create and transform the world.²¹²

In *KMB*, we see the village inhabitants completely oppressed by the village *Pir*, who controls their lives primarily because of their lack of education and their submission to the “will of God”. The *Pir* takes advantage of the people to the extent that he controls the only well in the area and the villagers grant him this control in return for his “blessings”. The protagonist Allah Vasaya (AV) is a poor water carrier and earns a paltry sum at the shrine, but is happy because it is the will of God. He is ready to submit his only prized possession, the bull, to the *Pir* in return of blessings for a baby. Ophra, the foreigner in the play, and the voice of truth nudges AV to choose between “being a spectator or actor” and “following prescriptions or having choices”.

AV: *Salaam Alaikum!* (Peace be Upon You)

Ophra: Walaikum Assalam (Peace be Upon You too). Who are you my good man?

AV: I’m Allah Vasaya. The water carrier of the Dry Village.

Ophra: The water carrier of the Dry Village or of *Pir Khooi Shah’s* shrine?

AV: Yes, you could say that. One can earn something or the other by working at the respected *Pir’s* shrine.

²¹² Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, translated by Myra Bergman Ramos, Continuum, New York, 1997, pp.28-30

- Ophra: How much do you earn Allah Vasaya?
- AV: Oh Sir, a whole 12 annas per container!!²¹³
- Ophra: How long will you survive on these 12 annas Allah Vasaya?
- AV: Yes Sir, it's hard work. But I'm happy that it is the will of God.
- Ophra: Allah Vasaya, what will you do with the bull?
- AV: What can I do with it sir? I'll give it at the *Pir's* shrine as an offering. Maybe this way my wife Sohni will be blessed with a child.
- Ophra: Ah you simpleton! Why don't you do some business now that you have this bull?
- AV: What can I do with the animal? I don't even own a piece of land!
- Ophra: There's a sweet water well a short distance from this village. Use the bull to cart plenty of containers of water from there and distribute the water in your village. You'll certainly earn much more than your Khooi Shah's 12 annas!
- AV: Sir, you are right, but.....(*looks back towards the shrine*)
- Ophra: Don't just think Allah Vasaya. Act upon it my good man! ACT!²¹⁴

Freire constructs a *pedagogy of the oppressed* that includes the oppressed in the struggle to regain their humanity. This pedagogy aims to make oppression and its causes a motivation for *reflection* for the oppressed, and enables them to engage in a journey of critical

²¹³ 12 annas is an old monetary unit but still used at times in conversation. It is equivalent to Rs.0.75, or about 6 pence.

²¹⁴ Excerpt of play from DVD recording, *Kala Menda Bhes*, (Black is My Robe), *Ajoka Theatre*, Lahore, 1996. My translation from Seraiki.

discovery in their struggle for liberation. Freire urges that this difficult task cannot be simply perceived theoretically and mere recognition of the reality of oppression is a limiting perception. While this insight and awareness is necessary, it cannot be a sufficient condition for liberation. The oppressed must after this realisation, enlist themselves in the struggle for freedom. In their submissive role towards the oppressor, the oppressed tend to rationalise his actions and his paternalistic treatment of them, remaining in a constant position of submission. This according to Freire is not acceptable and the oppressed must acquire a critical awareness of oppression through the practice of this struggle. To defy the domesticating nature of oppression and to no longer be prey to its force, the oppressed must turn upon it through *reflection and action* upon the world, in order to transform it. One of the difficulties of such a critical intervention lies in the fact that the oppressor knows very well that such an intervention is not advantageous to him. It is to his interest that the oppressed remain in a state of submissiveness, powerless in the face of their oppressive reality. For Freire, *reflection*, which is essential to *action*, is seen not in terms of mere explaining to the people their own actions, but rather dialoguing with them.²¹⁵

The above-mentioned conversation between Allah Vasay and Ophra is reflective of AV's submissive attitude towards the all-controlling *Pir*, rationalising the latter's dominance. He is engaged in dialogue with Ophra who through questioning makes him aware of the possibilities of his own freedom, but AV, despite this awareness is unable to take action. He may have reflected for a moment when he agrees that Ophra's proposition is correct, but looks back at the shrine, representing his fear of the *Pir*. "*Don't just think Allah Vasaya, ACT*" therefore becomes what Freire is advocating in his argument for the liberation of the oppressed.

This idea is moved forward towards action in Ophra's conversation with Ditta. In the section where Ditta is bent upon his search for a new well, and the *Pir* diverts his intentions by asking him to seek the well inside his soul instead and nourish it with faith and belief, Ditta is convinced of the argument until Ophra intervenes with counterarguments. Ophra questions the domination of the *Pir* and places practical arguments in front of Ditta to make him realise his subjugation.

²¹⁵ Freire, *ibid*, pp.30-35

- Ditta: The land of my soul is fertile? Yes the *Pir Saeen* (respected) is probably right. Yes he is right. Have I gone down the wrong path? (*Throws his shovel*)
- Ophra: Don't throw the shovel away Ditta! Down throw it down! You are not very far from your destination.
- Ditta: But why are you so interested in my shovel?
- Ophra: I know Ditta that the entire village's dreams are tied to your shovel. Their hopes are tied to it. This shovel represents hope and belief Ditta. Don't give up.
- Ditta: But the *Pir* says find the well inside your soul.
- Ophra: The inner well is not different from the outside well Ditta. The well inside you is flourishing. [...] Or you would have lost hope by now. Don't stop your quest.
- Ditta; But the *Pir* says....
- Ophra: The *Pir* is controlling the Shrine's well and tells others to seek the well inside of them?? Why doesn't he release the Shrine's well?
- Ditta: Yes, you are right. The shrine is under their control.
- Ophra: Satisfying your soul is one matter Ditta, but one needs air, water and nourishment to remain alive. This barren land cannot be sated simply by the power of faith. An empty stomach can't be filled by sermons. [...] Don't believe what the *Pir* says. He wants people to be dependent on him. He wants to own peoples' bodies and souls. Keep at your work Ditta, keep at it!!
- Ditta: But how long will this shovel keep working?

- Ophra: This shovel will have to keep working. Otherwise all your hard work will be wasted.
- Ditta: Who knows whether or not there is sweet water here?
- Ophra: No Ditta! There is water here! Can't you sense the fragrance of water in this earth? Smell it Ditta, Smell it!!
- Ditta: It smells like earth that is parched. Maybe I'm not destined to ever find the beautiful fragrance of moist earth.
- Ophra: No Ditta, smell it! Have faith and belief. There *is* water here. Don't believe the *Pir*. He wants to corrupt your faith and belief.
- Ditta: Yes! I can sense it! I can sense the fragrance of water in this!! I can sense it!
- Ophra: Then pick up your shovel and free the imprisoned water. Come on oh villagers! Ditta needs your help. He is not looking for this well for himself alone, but for all of you. For all of us! Help him!

In speaking of the duality that the oppressed are engaged with when they find themselves at one with the oppressor and internalise his image, Freire argues that the oppressed continue to express *fatalistic attitudes* towards their situations until they eventually find the reality of the situation and also their own consciousness. These fatalistic attitudes, Freire elaborates, are a mark of docility and are always related to the power of destiny, fate or inevitable forces, ultimately giving rise to a distorted view of God. Influenced by the ideas of myth and magic, the oppressed see their suffering and exploitation as the will of God.²¹⁶

This submission to larger forces, be it the will of God or a revered form in the guise of the *Pir*, directs the villagers to attribute their misfortunes to their ill fate. Allah Vasaya earns a

²¹⁶ Freire, *ibid*, pp.43-44

paltry sum at the shrine but agrees to this fate because God and the *Pir* are happy. When he fails to offer the bull at the shrine at the orders of the *Pir* and the animal is secretly poisoned, this is attributed to his disobedience towards larger forces.

Villager 1: Gama brother, have you heard? Allah Vasaya's bull died!

Gama: Ah yes I've heard. Terrible news. But it was bound to happen.

Villager 2: Oh, how's that?

Gama: He disobeyed the word of *Pir Saeen*. Humiliated him!

Villager 2: This is true Gama. Who has ever been saved from the wrath of the *Pir's* curse?

Gama: No one my man, no one!

In another instance, Sundri refuses to hear from Ophra the truth about the killing of the bull and calls him a disbeliever.

Sundri: So if you know everything, tell me who killed Sohni's bull?

Ophra: Why, The *Pir* killed it Sundri!

Sundri: What are you saying! The *Pir* is a source of blessing for us

Ophra: Not a source, just an excuse. Tell me, how many of your prayers have been answered? How you have prayed for a child!

Sundri: Ah unfortunate me! None of my prayers have been answered. How I prayed.
Got amulets too!

Ophra: This is what I mean Sundri. The *Pir* is not a source, merely an excuse. If someone's prayers are answered, the *Pir* gets credit for it. If prayers go unanswered, it is attributed to the will of God.

Sundri: You are a disbeliever for sure! Repent Man! Repent!

The same power of religion and myth is evident in the *Pir's* various speeches to the villagers, particularly when he admonishes Ditta who asks him to pray for his ailing wife and for rain in the Dry Village. This, coupled with what Freire describes as one of the reasons for imposing prohibitions on the oppressed to dissuade them from critically intervening with reality, makes the villagers of the Dry Village submissive to the *Pir's* will. "The oppressor knows full well that this intervention would not be to his interest. What is to his interest is for people to continue in a state of submersion, impotent in the face of oppressive reality."²¹⁷

Pir. You pray for rain!!??

Why should it rain? What have we done to deserve God's blessings?

Which tongue here does not lie?

Which heart here has place for only God and no one else?

Repent! Repent! Repent for your bad deeds.

Cleanse your intentions. Cleanse your hearts.

Thank the Lord that he has not destroyed your village completely.

And that he has kept the Shrine's well brimming.

The well is here through because of Us! (*Referring to himself*)

This water is no ordinary water. It is sacred water that quenches your body and soul.

Be thankful for your blessings.

Another characteristic that Freire attributes to the oppressed is *self-depreciation*. Derived from the internalisation of the opinion of their oppressors, the oppressed are convinced

²¹⁷ Freire, *ibid*, p.34

of their own inferiority. The oppressed never allow themselves the credit of knowing anything that they may have learned through their own experiences in the world, and naturally distrust themselves after internalising the opinion of their oppressors. Freire quotes examples of discussions with peasants in educational projects, in which they deride their own ability to think and often insist that there is no difference between them and animals. "When they do admit a difference, it favours the animals. 'They are freer than we are'".²¹⁸

This comparison between humans and animals is made evident more than once in *KMB's* narrative as well as stylistic representation. The reduced status of a wife / woman is evident on more than one occasion, often comparing her status to the bull, and more often reducing her status compared to the animal. This is established in the first dialogue between Gama and Rukka, (mentioned above) where the value of a bull is given more credit than a woman. (*One can find wives, but a strong bull is hard to find these days*). This attitude of the villagers is evident as a stylistic concern, representing the scene of the death of Ditta's wife and Allah Vasay's bull. Two groups of mourners sit on opposite sides of the stage, each surrounding a dead body. While Ditta and his friends mourn for his loss in a very loud, stylistic yet comical dirge-like fashion, AV's and his friends follow suit in the same manner for the bull.

(Ditta's house)

Ditta: Noorie! You sleep peacefully leaving these little children behind.

(Each sentence in this segment is followed by a collective and exaggerated wail)

Who will look after them? Who will clean their noses? How will I look after these children?

Gama: Now who will cook the food? O friends! Who will mop the floor? Who will massage this poor man's feet?

Oh poor unfortunate Ditta!!

²¹⁸ Freire *ibid*, p.45

Allah Vasaya's house

AV: Ah, you were my right arm!

(Each sentence in this segment is followed by a collective and exaggerated wail)

Like my younger brother! Why have you left me?

Oh brother Gama! My back is broken. I can't even stand up!

Gama: Oh friends!

Now who will bring the wood?

Who will share his burden?

Oh poor unfortunate Allah Vasaya!!

(Gama and Rukka take centre stage between both funerals)

(Here is it essential to explain that the following exchange uses the word "choorian" as a pun. In the following passage Gama and Rukka continue their mourning, unknowingly for different subjects. Gama speaks for Ditta's wife, and Rukka for the bull. While Gama speaks of "choorian" as the bangles a woman wears, Rukka understands "choorian" as the dry mixture of bread and other edibles mixed together to feed livestock, but also edible by humans. The author uses the pun to reinstate with comic reference the equal status delegated to women and animals in this narrative.)

Gama: Poor unfortunate! How sad he is!

Rukka: Seems like his back is broken.

Gama: How will the wife's work happen now?

Rukka: Who will share the burden?

Gama: Who will put *choorian* in her arms?

Rukka: What Gama? *Choorian*?

Gama: And who will feed her *choorian*?

Rukka: What Gama? *Choorian*?

Gama: Oh my friends! Who will massage this poor unfortunate's head with oil?

Rukka: What Gama? If Allah Vasaya's bull was doing all the work, what was Sohni doing all this while?

Gama: Stupid Man! I'm not talking of the bull! I'm talking about Ditta's wife!

Rukka: Oh I thought.... But I have to say my friend...

Gama: What?

Rukka: Both have suffered pain equally.

Gama: Ah brother Rukka! Whether bull or wife, it's a terrible pain to lose either. Whether wife or bull, they both have to die one day.

The most obvious representation of this idea comes in the form of Maasi's suggestion to AV to exchange his first wife Sundri for Ditta's bull. Her logical explanation is that Ditta has a bull for which he has no use, and AV has an extra wife, for which he has no use. Ditta's bull will help AV to further his work, whereas AV's wife will help Ditta to look after his children. This particular episode as we know it is inspired by a true event, and integrated into the narrative when *Ajoka* directors read a minor news item in the papers about a similar incident. At AV's hesitation Maasi reaffirms that Sundri was his property to deal with as he pleased. Sohni backs

the argument with “*who in fact asks women about marriage or divorce anyway?*” As the deal is closed, a wedding procession taking Sundri to Ditta’s place moves from stage right to stage left. The procession is celebratory, accompanied by song and music. A cloth curtain hides the bride as the group moves along. As the procession reaches its destination on the left, it turns around to make its way back to the stage right, this time taking the bull back in the same fashion as it accompanied the bride. The songs and celebration are the same, only the central character has changed. This deliberate repetition emphasises the concept of the equality between woman and animal (or perhaps the elevated status of the animal) that the villagers continue to express through the play.

Freire’s literacy programme was aimed at conscientization, a dialectical interplay between action and reflection, which would enable people to come out of their culture of silence and empower them to make their own destinies. Describing the traditional educational system to “*as the banking system*”, Freire identifies the relationship between the teacher and student in this system to be *narrative* in nature. This relationship makes the teacher the narrator, and the student a passive listener. “Filling” the students with his narration that is disconnected from reality, the teacher conducts an act of “depositing”, whereas the students become mere “receptacles” of this information. In the banking system of education, “knowledge is [...] bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing”²¹⁹. In this system the teacher justifies his existence by considering the ignorance of the students as absolute. This system regards humans as manageable beings, making them less able to develop a critical consciousness. “Implicit in the banking concept is the assumption of a dichotomy between human beings and the world: a person is merely *in* the world, not *with* the world or with others; the individual is a spectator, not a re-creator”.²²⁰ As opposed to this, the revolutionary educator will always aim to engage his students in critical thinking. Referring to “problem posing education” as a means to contradict the banking system, Freire urges dialogue as a way to overcome these contradictions. The students are therefore no longer mere listeners, but participants in a critical dialogue with their teachers. While the banking system suppresses creativity and submerges the consciousness, the problem posing education continues to unveil reality and strives for emerging consciousness and critical intervention in

²¹⁹ Freire, *ibid*, p.53

²²⁰ Freire, *ibid*, p.56

reality.²²¹ Problem posing education places its argument in the fact that people who are dominated must fight for their emancipation. It is only this process that will allow people to overcome their *false sense of reality*.

Platforms for critical reflection

In discussing Boal's argument about the repressive function of tragedy, which makes the spectator a passive recipient in a performance, and Brecht's methods of distanciation which allow a viewer to engage with the action and arouse his critical consciousness and his capacity for action, I have argued that both *Tehrik e Niswan* and *Ajoka* aim to provide platforms for critical reflection for their audiences. Using case studies that reflect the theories of Brecht as well as Paulo Freire, who suggests that the oppressed can only transform their oppressed world if they recognise or *perceive* it through reflection, I have argued that the work of both these theatre groups represent the transition between Aristotle's repressive function of tragedy and Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, which goes beyond the stage of reflection and engages in direct action. This characteristic makes the work of these two theatre groups distinct from Boal's methods because their dramatic narratives represent reflection and the *possibility* of action by the oppressed, and the strategies advocated by Boal encourage the oppressed spectator *to act* in a dramatic narrative.

The pedagogy of the oppressed according to Freire is revealed in two distinct stages. In the first stage, the oppressed unveil the world of oppression and commit to its transformation. Once this aim is achieved, in the second stage the pedagogy of the oppressed becomes a pedagogy of all the people involved in the process of liberation. For both stages it is vital that the culture of domination is confronted through action. In the first stage this confrontation takes place when the oppressed *perceive* the world of oppression. In the second it is confronted when myths of the old order are expelled.²²²

In *Kala Menda Bhes*, we witness a system of oppression perpetuated by the *Pir* of the Dry Village. His control over the villagers comes from the perpetuation of myths and the false

²²¹ Freire, *ibid*, pp.52-62

²²² Freire, *ibid*, pp.36-37

notion of God that he propagates to an illiterate population. This oppression is visible in the fear of the villagers who dare not defy the *Pir's* orders, who give in to his demands and turn to him for blessings, instead of taking charge of their own lives. Allah Vasaya chooses to submit his bull as an offering until Ophra makes him think again. Ditta agrees to stop his quest for a well at the command of the *Pir*, despite his hard work. Ophra here becomes the inner voice, the voice of truth or one that forces the characters in the play to reflect upon their conditions. The *Pir* continues to scheme against each new turn of events. The bull is killed when not submitted to the shrine; Ditta is veered from his ownership of the newly found well by the *Pir's* invention of a miracle. The threat of the fast drying well at the shrine and Ditta's discovery of a new well are enough reasons for the *Pir* to formulate a false perception in the minds of the villagers as he lays claim to the new discovery. In order to continue his control over the villagers, the *Pir* commands them not to come near the new well, as he is the real owner of it. This he justifies by relating a revelation he had the previous night in which he was told by a larger power that since the shrine well was drying up, it was being moved to a new location. The new well Ditta had dug up was in fact the same one that had been revealed to him in his dream the previous night. Unable to argue in the face of higher forces, the villagers succumb silently.

This system of oppression is challenged slowly by the only outer voice in the play, Ophra. Ophra's task is to conduct what Freire calls the first stage of the pedagogy of the oppressed; *to unveil the world of oppression*. He also provokes the villagers to critically reflect upon their condition, which inspires Ditta to continue digging for the well, and Allah Vasaya to rethink offering Sohni's bull to the shrine.

A similar situation prevails in *Tehrik e Niswan's Aglay Janam Mohay Bitya Na Keejo*. Samina lives a submissive existence oppressed by a family, and more so a social culture that gives more importance to a male child. Her friend Zubeda shares her fate but it is Ayesha's voice that lends them courage to find their own freedom. By comparing their lives with those of the boys, the girls take a step towards their freedom through the process of recognition of oppression. The same courage provokes Samina to finally lash out at her brother for the years of oppression she has suffered through the years.

Advocating the struggle for freedom that involves action and serious reflection, Freire urges that any critical dialogue that infers action cannot be replaced by monologues, slogans or communiqués. Such a step will in fact liberate the oppressed with instruments of domestication without any reflective participation on their part.²²³ The essence of dialogue is the word, in which we find two dimensions – reflection and action in a dynamic interaction with each other. One deprived of the other sacrifices the dialogue. When a word is deprived of its dimension of action, reflection suffers, and the word is transformed to idle chatter or *verbalism*. An empty word that does not denounce the world, cannot transform it, since action is absent. If on the other hand, action is emphasised to the disadvantage of reflection, the word transforms to action for action's sake, or *activism*.²²⁴

Tehrik e Niswan's AJ when performed for communities has been the platform for many exchanges of dialogue between the participants as well as the audience involved. At a given performance at Orangi Town, (mentioned in previous chapter), I have been witness to one such discussion when a woman accurately brought to attention the fact that women themselves were responsible for the chauvinistic attitude of men in their families because of the way they raised their sons, empowering them at the disadvantage of their own daughters. Had the play been a mere outsider experience for the community it would have subscribed to Freire's ideas of monologues and slogan mongering. It is however the post performance discussion that usually follows *Tehrik e Niswan's* plays that transform the nature of the exercise from sermon to platforms for critical dialogue. If mere action were emphasised here by taking the play to the communities, with no room for reflection, the play would have been reduced to the status of activism. It is only the opening up of a discussion that enables an audience to engage with the content of the performance in on an individual level. Be it through its content or through its creative stylistic approach, *AJ* manages to be a thought provoking play that urges its viewers to think without imposing a point of view.

²²³ Freire, *ibid*, p.47

²²⁴ Freire, *ibid*, pp.68-69

"The important thing, [...] is for the people to come to feel like masters of their thinking by discussing the thinking and views of the world explicitly or implicitly manifest in their own suggestions and those of their comrades"²²⁵

Analysis of the plays through Brecht and Freire

The four plays by *Tehrik e Niswan* and *Ajoka* discussed in the last two chapters reflect the theories of both Brecht and Freire that advocate the struggle for the emancipation of the oppressed. Whether it is through Freire's theories of conscientization or Brecht's distanciation that emphasises the illusory nature of a performance, both *AJ* and *KMB* provide a level of critical engagement with the performance. Whether through aesthetic devices that create a distance between the spectator and the audience in *Anji*, or the representation of the political and religious leaders as a forces of exploitation of the masses in *Jaloos*, we find Brecht's theories manifested in the plays and also revisited in the theories of Freire in a post colonial context. Both *Jaloos* and *KMB* take up the issues of political and religious exploitation by political leaders or figures of religious authority. The *Pir's* mistreatment of the poor villagers in *KMB* is reflective of class divides and the abuse of the poor by the few privileged in society through capitalism. Both *Anji* and *AJ* question the unequal status of women in society which make them underprivileged citizens of the social fabric and place impositions on them that are not of their own choice. While *Anji* struggles to debate a life of marital compromise or remain single with the social pressures that accompany the latter, Samina in *AJ* yearns for a portion of the freedom her brother has simply because he is born a male. While Brecht advocates interventionist thinking as a central component in his conviction of the need to change the world, Freire's *pedagogy of the oppressed* calls for making oppression and its causes grounds for critical reflection. However for Freire, reflection is only one aspect of the struggle, which once recognised, must move towards *action*. Both Brecht and Freire advocate struggle against domination. Hence in *Michhil*, (*Jaloos*) actors invite the audience at the end of the play to make a human chain against the political exploitation and betrayal of the masses at the hands of religious leaders and politicians.

²²⁵ Freire, *ibid*, p.105

In making aesthetic decisions regarding movement in the play Brecht states that stylisation should heighten the natural element of a play and given that the theatre depends on the gest, and cannot do without choreography, “elegant movement and graceful grouping” and inventive miming can alienate and greatly help the a story.²²⁶ These devises are employed in *Jaloos* where stylised movements characterise the narrative and also reinforce the unreality of the action. While realist theatre relying on illusion invites the spectator’s gaze, and encourages him to receive the play as a mirror image of the world, Brecht’s theatre is a constant reminder of the illusory and changeable nature of the world. Hence the tendency of the audience to impose its gaze on the happenings on stage and to transfer fantasies onto the figures is stopped by Brecht’s method of work.²²⁷

KMB’s narrative, that establishes the oppressed and the oppressor in very apparent demarcations, exemplifies Freire’ theory on critical reflection through the voice of Ophra and the subsequent actions of the villagers. For Freire, it is vital that the culture of domination is confronted through action. Ophra’s voice in *KMB* allows the characters to perceive the oppression, as does Ayesha’s voice in *AJ*. Like Brecht’s promise for the possibility of change in the present, Freire is also convinced that once the oppression is recognised, the myths of the old order will be expunged.

For all the plays discussed, whether through Brecht’s theories or Freire’s, the techniques, devices and forms employed resonate with the objectives and beliefs of the two theorists. In the discussion on both groups in the last two chapters, I have analysed specific works that use Brechtian theatrical devices and address throughout their repertoire issues that are both political and social. Whether it is *Ajoka’s Dekh Tamasha Chalta Bunn* (Watch the Show and Move On), which challenges the blasphemy laws introduced by Zia ul Haque, or *Tehrik e Niswan’s Aglay Janam Mohay Bitya Na Keejo* (In my Next Life Do Not Let Me Be Born a Daughter) that comments upon discrimination against women in society; whether in fact it is *Ajoka’s Kala Menda Bhes* (Black is my Robe), or *Tehrik e Niswan’s Anji*, that use the Brechtian theory of creating a platform for critical thinking, and discussed for the latter, employ Brecht’s

²²⁶ Wright, 204

²²⁷ Wright, *ibid*, pp.55-56

theatrical and aesthetic devices to remove the illusory nature of a play, these plays reflect the political commitment that underpinned the work of the two groups. The four plays I have discussed in the last two chapters, *Jaloos*, *Kala Menda Bhes*, *Anji*, and *Aglay Janam Mohay Bitya Na Keejo*, exemplify the politics of both groups in the issues they address. *Jaloos* takes up the political exploitation and betrayal of the masses by political and religious leaders and *Kala Menda Bhes* addresses the exploitation of the poor. Both *Anji* and *Aglay Janam Mohay Bitya Na Keejo*, challenge the societal prejudices against women and their repressed status in society. By devising plays that reflect their political beliefs and addressing themes that are relevant to the socio political conditions of the country, (struggling against class divisions and the exploitation of the poor, fighting for women's status in society, and voicing dissent against a repressive state machinery) both *Ajoka* and *Tehrik e Niswan* have maintained a commitment to their political ideology. Both groups reflect in their practice characteristics attributed by Kershaw to alternate theatre in Britain: an effort to combine entertainment with debate, discussion, socio political recommendations and the representation of a theatre of social (and political) engagement.²²⁸ Both groups played to trade union audiences, at workers' rallies or for that matter to support the women's movement, as an extension of their own affiliation to the politics of these movements and in a spirit of solidarity with the audiences. At the same time they played to urban audiences who in the early years of protest shared their vision of challenging the repression of a military regime. While it was not necessary that they aimed to work only with one kind of audience (community or urban) and therefore the aesthetics of their performances were not essentially shaped by the culture of their audience as discussed by Kershaw, and for that matter, their work does not always fit the prescribed characteristics of alternate theatre Kershaw speaks of, they nevertheless fearlessly fought the oppression of a state machinery in hostile, dangerous and aggressive situations (censorship, lack of funds, surveillance by intelligence agencies, the hostilities faced by them in the face of right wing factions that threatened their performances and a complete lack of infrastructural support). Their work may on occasion be criticised for being overtly direct in addressing an issue, but let us turn to Freire's very important thoughts on the matter. For Freire it is essential that action and reflection occur simultaneously. A critical analysis of reality may however show that a particular form of

²²⁸ Kershaw, *ibid*, p.5

action is not possible or appropriate at the present time. If reflection leads people to conclude that one form of action or another is inappropriate at a given time, they may not be accused of inaction. *This is because critical reflection is also action.*²²⁹ What makes the work of both *Tehrik e Niswan* and *Ajoka* compelling is their conviction and their survival through a gamut of political and social adversities. In good times or bad, in financial crisis or not, the work has never stopped. Perhaps this is their biggest argument in the face of the donor-driven culture of theatre in Pakistan that I address in the next chapter. Studied in its contextual conditions, the theatre of *Tehrik e Niswan* and *Ajoka* stands out in sharp contrast to the theatre undertaken by the companies in the NGO sphere where specific issues were and are still projected in the comfort and safety of the Development agenda.

I now move the discussion to the aspect of theatre that serves as a contrast to *Tehrik e Niswan's* and *Ajoka's* ideologies; theatre that is conducted under the Development agenda. I discuss theatre groups working under this agenda in the context of the growth of Development in Pakistan, and bring to light the distinctly different objectives that their approaches bear compared to the kind of political theatre practiced by *Tehrik e Niswan* and *Ajoka* discussed so far.

²²⁹ Freire, *ibid*, p.109

CHAPTER 5

Fitting the Bill

I now move to the turning point of this discussion, whereby an influx of donor driven NGO activities in Pakistan impacted upon the nature of theatre and gave rise to a mushrooming of large and small theatre companies throughout the country. The growth of NGOs in Pakistan must be seen in relationship to the spread of neoliberalism globally, and in Pakistan's context I discuss this in the time post Zia ul Haque.

As a contrast to the political activist theatre of *Tehrik* and *Ajoka* in the 80's, the advent of forces of neoliberalism and globalisation created a surge of NGOs in the 90's in Pakistan and brought about a growth in the use of theatre as a tool for development by NGOs, creating numerous theatre groups that catered to the donor-funded and issue-based agendas of the NGOs. The work of these theatre groups can be seen as a contrast to the politically motivated activist theatre of *Ajoka* and *Tehrik e Niswan*. Apart from the issues the NGO based companies address (that are directly related to the range of specific concerns NGOs have on their agenda, such as health, population) and the direct manner in which they are tackled, one aspect that adds to the argument is the changed nature of activism to *paid activism*.

I begin the discussion with a brief overview of the rise of neoliberalism globally followed by the impact it has had on Pakistan. In the arguments that follow the rise of NGOs I examine the role of these organisations and the critique that identifies their limitations and questions notions of accountability. These arguments, both globally and in the context of Pakistan set the stage for my view that the surge of theatre groups that service the agendas of the donor organisations and NGOs is weak in its inception. Created largely to service short-term goals or very specific agendas, these theatre groups, serve towards the transformation of a socio political tool such as theatre into a commodity.

As case studies, I present the work of a Karachi based theatre group *Raasti*, which is currently employed as a "partner" with PLAN Pakistan on a yearly contract basis, and has a history of working with numerous donor organisations. I consider the point of view of the NGO *Aahung*, which works towards improving the sexual health of men, women and adolescents and aims to raise awareness, self-esteem, and to improve healthy behaviour. To substantiate my argument I also include two case studies from *Tehrik e Niswan*'s repertory of recent donor based projects they undertook. These projects were outlined specifically as issue related plays and were conceived to meet the demands of the funding organisations. I argue that this new *sponsored* form of community theatre, when taken up by *Tehrik e Niswan* fell short of its own ideology in its lack of sustenance.

In highlighting the problems of a culture propagated by Development, I also discuss Julia Elyachar's argument of how Development initiatives seize traditional practices of the poor in the service of their agendas towards globalisation and in doing so add new economic and cultural value to their social and cultural networks, that in actual fact ultimately create a means for their dispossession. I also discuss James Ferguson's argument that highlights the generic approach in the Development discourse that justifies development agencies in intervening in a given country, and the resultant and crucial side effects that emerge in the form of depoliticising a society in the course of conducting its actions.

The rise of Neoliberalism

David Harvey describes neoliberalism as “a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade”.²³⁰ Characterised by features such as the reduced role of the state, neoliberalism advocates a shift of emphasis from public and community to individualism, reducing expenditure by the state in areas such as social services, health and education.²³¹ This privatisation and the withdrawal of the state from many areas of social services finds its roots in the restructuring of state forms after the Second World War, devised to prevent a repetition of conditions of the Great Depression in the 1930s.

In the 1930s an economist John Maynard Keynes devised a theory that advocated government intervention in order to provide more equity in development. This Keynesian model also influenced the designing of institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB). When these institutions were designed in 1944, their role was signified to assist towards lending for reconstruction development and balance of payment problems. At that point there was no provision in their mandate for control over the economic decisions of individual governments, or intervention in any country's national policy. This is in sharp contrast to their role today.²³²

The Keynesian model was deployed in the fiscal and monetary policies of many countries after the Second World War, whereby the state created several welfare systems for the people. By the 1970s unemployment and inflation were high, social expenditures soared. In the debates that ensued to overcome the crisis, the voice of that section of the individuals who argued for liberating corporate and business power and re establishing market freedoms emerged as strongest by the mid 1970s.²³³

²³⁰ David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2007, p.2

²³¹ A Primer on Neoliberalism – Global Issues”, www.globalissues.org accessed 5 February 2006

²³² A Primer on Neoliberalism, *ibid*

²³³ Harvey, *ibid*, pp.10-13

In May 1979, Margaret Thatcher was elected the Prime Minister of Britain, and one of her directives was to change the economy. She argued that the Keynesian policies had to be abandoned and fiscal and social policies had to be revised. This meant a confrontation with trade union power, a retraction of the state from welfare commitments, reduction of taxes, and the privatisation of public enterprises, which altogether created an atmosphere that attracted foreign investments. Individualism took precedence over social solidarity. This shift towards what Harvey calls “a greater social inequality and the restoration of power to the upper classes” was also seen in the USA when Reagan won the elections in 1980. Deregulation created freedom for the markets, favouring corporate interests. (This was just one of the many shifts that impelled the movement towards neoliberalisation). When in 1982-84 Mexico went into default, the Reagan administration put the powers of the IMF and the US Treasury together to assist in rolling over the debt, but in return for the implementation of neoliberal reforms. This treatment finally purged the IMF of all Keynesian influences. The IMF and the World Bank, in return for debt rescheduling, required indebted countries to implement reforms such as cuts in welfare expenses and privatisation. This was known as “structural adjustment”.²³⁴

Junaid Ahmad adds that the neoliberal economic reforms have weakened the nation states in their ability to manage their own affairs. The World Bank and the IMF force Third World governments to sell their public industries at very low prices, and advocate not spending money on health, education and social welfare sectors. These Structural Adjustment Programmes have been implemented in many countries of the Third World.²³⁵ The IMF and the World Bank have intervened in the economies of developing states through the SAP. This has meant restraining state expenditures by setting budget-cutting targets and paring back state ownership through privatisation. Since these institutions control the loans, they are able to push conditions on the states. Similar conditions are imposed on Pakistan, whereby loans are approved only if certain conditions are fulfilled. For instance, the SAP is designed to facilitate the operation of multi national corporations in the country.²³⁶

²³⁴ Harvey, *ibid*, pp.22-29

²³⁵ Junaid S. Ahmad, “The Limits of NGO’s”, www.pakistanlink.com accessed 20 December 2005

²³⁶ Shahrukh Rafi Khan, “Structural Adjustment and its Impact”, in *Continuity and Change. Socio Political and Institutional Dynamics in Pakistan*. Edited by S. Akbar Zaidi, City Press, Karachi, 2003, pp.87-88

The neoliberal state in theory favours strong individual private property rights, the rule of law and free trade. Harvey explains that neoliberal theorists are suspicious of democracy as any governance by a majority is seen as a threat to individual rights. Shifts in social policy created structural changes in the nature of governance. Business and corporations were seen to act in collaboration with the state and had a strong influence in matters of legislation, making the boundaries between state and corporations increasingly porous. As access to the judiciary became increasingly expensive, a collective means of action under neoliberalism became articulated through various advocacy groups and non-governmental organisations (NGOs).²³⁷ Harvey sees the rise of the NGOs to have accompanied the rise of neoliberalism. Since needy individuals lack the finances to pursue their own rights, there has been a rise in advocacy groups and NGOs since the 1980s, whereby making these groups and organisations fill the vacuum that has been left after the state's withdrawal from social services.²³⁸

The rise of the NGOs

Akber Zaidi describes the Reagan-Thatcher popularisation of the free market and the retreat of the state as factors that contributed to the emergence of the NGOs and their role as favoured conduits for the western donor agencies to conduct development work in countries of the developing world. The new theory around development that identified it to be more sustainable and democratic also redefined the role of the state. This environment also saw the rise of a considerable amount of NGOs in under developed countries.²³⁹

In the environment after the demise of the Soviet Union, and the emergence of an anti interventionist approach to government, the role of the government was reduced and NGOs were encouraged to step in to play a role in development. One reason behind this interest in the role of the NGOs that Zaidi emphasises was what he describes as state failure. Given the assumption that the state had fallen short of providing the needs of development, the private sector and the NGOs had been encouraged to fill this void. The advantages of these

²³⁷ Harvey, *ibid*, pp. 64-78

²³⁸ *ibid*, p.177

²³⁹ S. Akbar Zaidi, "NGO Failure and the Need to Bring Back the State" in *The New Development Paradigm, Papers on Institutions, NGOs, Gender and Local Government*, Oxford University Press, Oxford Pakistan Paperbacks, 2000, pp.203-205

organisations compared to that of the state lay in their supposed ability to be more efficient and cost effective in providing services to the poor.

Edwards and Hulme speak of the “New Policy Agenda” under which donor agencies give a great deal of prominence to NGOs to disseminate their funds, making them a preferred channel for social change.²⁴⁰ Their research shows that the belief that NGOs are more efficacious has resulted in large amounts of official funds being channelled to them for work in various sectors, including education and health. This perception of NGOs as service providers has grown in governments in the South such as Bangladesh, Nepal and Philippines. Facts and figures presented by Edwards and Hulme in the cited paper not only show the growing increase in official funding for NGOs in Northern countries, but also a rapid growth in the size and scale of NGOs in countries of South Asia. For instance, the figures they present in their study show an 18% to 54% increase in government grants to the five largest development NGOs in the UK in 1994, as compared to 7% and 15% just ten years prior. Or for example the NGO BRAC in Bangladesh has expanded to more than 10,000 staff, covers 15,000 villages and expansion plans include working with 3 million people and with children in 100,000 schools.²⁴¹ BRAC is an NGO that aims for the alleviation of poverty and the empowerment of the poor and lists CIDA (Canada), Department for International Development (DFID), European Commission (EC), Netherlands Organisation for International Development (NOVIB), The Royal Netherlands Embassy, The Royal Norwegian Embassy, the World Food Programme (WFP), AusAid (Australia), DANIDA (Denmark), SIDA (Sweden), The Government of Bangladesh, The Global Fund and UNDP as its donors.²⁴² Such an emphasis on the NGOs is evident in the World Bank’s identification of the strengths of the non-government organisations to be their strong grassroots links, cost effectiveness, use of participatory methodologies and tools, and their long term commitment and sustainability. In their efficacy to perform better than the state, NGOs are identified as being locally rooted and appropriate instruments to reach the people.²⁴³

²⁴⁰ M. Edwards and D. Hulme, “Too Close for Comfort? The Impact of Official Aid on Non Governmental Organisations”, *World Development*, Vol. 24, No.6, 1996, Pergamon, Great Britain, p.961

²⁴¹ Edwards and Hulme, *ibid*, p.962

²⁴² <http://www.brac.net/donors.htm>, accessed 14 August 2008

²⁴³ S. Akbar Zaidi, *ibid*, p.208

The Critique of NGOs

Having discussed the above however, a fair amount of arguments have been presented concerning the inefficacy of the NGOs in this development paradigm. Many arguments are presented that NGOs have failed to assist those that they were meant to benefit. Increasing funding and their rapid spread then raises questions about their performance as well as their accountability. It is argued that under this official funding, NGOs are drawn away from accountability to their own constituencies, are unable to remain independent performers in a society and end up working towards short term and quantitative outputs. While there is evidence that services provided by the NGOs can be more cost effective compared to those provided by the state. Edwards and Hulme find in their research that the extent of NGO outreach amongst the poor displays more geographical expansion, (breadth) than an attempt to reach the poorest amongst the poor (depth). Amongst other limitations that NGOs encounter in the face of funding is rigidity and the inability to innovate. As organisations grow, a high level of bureaucracy steps in and NGOs find themselves fulfilling demands of projects reports, evaluating and accounting. Such outputs and targets are demands from donors, which if not met can cause the withdrawal of funds. Often in order to meet the strict and tightly framed demands of the donors, NGOs lose their flexibility and find themselves playing the role of contractors for the donors.²⁴⁴

The increase in donor funding to the NGOs has not only resulted on a dependency relationship for the latter, but also has channelled the agendas that are determined for them by the donors. Adil Najam argues that this relationship makes the NGOs accountable to the donors and patrons, and makes their activities largely donor driven. The NGOs are accountable for spending the funds that are given to them for specific and designated purposes. In this donor-NGO relationship, donors have a dual control over the NGOs; in matters of finance, and those of policy. Both these matters are interconnected. The money is provided to fulfill the goals and policies of the donor, and checks are kept in place on not just whether the funds were spent appropriately but also how they were spent. This level of control can also imply that funds may be withdrawn from the NGO if certain policy agendas are not met with. As a result, Najam argues, NGOs tend to be over accountable to the donors, leading to the dangers of being co

²⁴⁴ Edwards and Hulme, *ibid*, pp.962-964

opted by them and to what he refers to as their “puppetisation”. Their intellectual undertaking, referred to earlier can result in a displacement of their goals, whereby NGOs undertake tangible projects to suit and please potential funding organisations.²⁴⁵ Quoting the work of J. Tendlar on the subject, Najam elaborates that this reliance on funding by donors often makes NGOs willing to compromise the *process* of their work, (which entails independence and participation), in order to fulfil the *product* that is demanded by the donors. In showing a flexibility of accountability towards their own goals, NGOs may very often change them. This may be read as a positive aspect displaying their dynamism, but at the same time it can imply that they are easily swayed by the demands or requirements of their donors.²⁴⁶

While the subject of accountability is a complex matter, Najam presents the argument by Edwards and Hulme that if the claims of NGOs for their legitimacy are to be sustained, they have to be accountable for what they do. NGOs have to fulfil tasks of multiple accountability – upwards to their donors and downwards to their beneficiaries and partners. Because of the multiplicity of the task, NGOs turn their priorities to their patrons, often at the cost of their responsibilities to their own goals and vision. It is only with the recognition of these imbalances that NGOs can structure their organisations to show equal accountability to their patrons, clients as well as to themselves.²⁴⁷ Zaidi elaborates on this problem by adding that dependence on donor money can push NGOs to shift their focus on issues that are more favourable to the donors and attract more funds. A need to continue receiving funds can compel NGOs to overstate their achievements in reports and evaluations, often overstating the impact of their work. More critically the unpredictability of funds can determine the work of an NGO. If a donor moves to another region or changes areas of specialisation, the NGO may cease to exist. As is often the case, donor funding can be time specific and project bound, restricting the continuity with which an NGO may operate in its area.²⁴⁸

²⁴⁵ Adil Najam, “NGO Accountability: A Conceptual Framework”, *Development Policy Review*, Vol.14, Blackwell Publishers, UK and Cambridge MA, 1996, pp.342-344

²⁴⁶ Najam, *ibid*, pp.348-349

²⁴⁷ Najam, *ibid*, pp.350-352

²⁴⁸ S. Akbar Zaidi, *ibid*, p.213

In evaluating accountability mechanisms for NGOs, Alnoor Ebrahim concludes that performance assessments such as reports and evaluations give donors the licence to reward funding to those organisations that adhere to previously proven approaches, thereby punishing those NGOs that may have attempted to develop a more innovative or risky process based approach. Donor appraisals tend to be more focussed on *products* (like number of schools built) rather than *processes* (like participation or empowerment). Products are more easily quantifiable, tangible and short term, compared to the more ambiguous and less tangible processes. This emphasis on functional forms of accountability tends to reward NGOs for short term impacts that have tangible results, resulting in the neglect of more long term strategies that address more complex issues of social and political change.²⁴⁹

The rise of NGOs in Pakistan

With independence in 1947 and the formation of Pakistan, we also see the beginnings of the evolution of the non-profit sector in the country. The Partition had resulted in an exodus of migrants into Pakistan and this was the first instance when the civil society responded to the social welfare and needs of the people. While the government also set up initiatives to provide shelter, healthcare and welfare assistance to the migrants, the atmosphere proved conducive for the establishment of voluntary organisations such as the All Pakistan Women's Association (APWA). While the initial years focussed on the welfare of the migrants, the 1950's saw organisations including APWA aiming towards rehabilitation, reconstruction and advocacy work towards women's rights.²⁵⁰

In 1956, Pakistan formally became a republic under President Iskander Mirza. Unstable political conditions because of weak relationships with Afghanistan and conflicts with India over Kashmir, prompted Mirza to abolish the constitution and grant power to a military government under General Ayub Khan in 1958. Under this military government, voluntary organisations were encouraged to play a supplementary role in providing social services. In 1961, the

²⁴⁹ Alnoor Ebrahim, "Accountability in Practice: Mechanisms for NGOs", *World Development*, Vol.31, No.5, Pergamon, Great Britain, 2003, pp.817-826

²⁵⁰ Aisha Ghaus-Pasha and Muhammad Asif Iqbal. "Defining the Nonprofit Sector: Pakistan." *Working Papers of the Johns Hopkins Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project*, no. 42. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Center for Civil Society Studies, 2003, p.4

Voluntary Social Welfare Agencies Registration and Control Ordinance was passed to regulate and systemize the activities of voluntary organizations.

In the 1970's there were some changes to the scope of the non-profit sector in Pakistan. Following the separation of East Pakistan to form the new state of Bangladesh, and the establishment of a democratic government under Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, his political party, the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) looked at a more centralised role of state in the provision of social services. The government nationalised educational institutions in 1972, along with those run by voluntary organisations. The NGO Resource Centre (NGORC) describes this period as one that was not conducive to voluntary organisations. In 1977, the PPP won the elections defeating the Pakistan National Alliance (PNA), a group of nine political parties, which then challenged the results and called for Bhutto's resignation. A series of protests organised by the PNA across the country put the country into unrest and the Bhutto regime was ultimately brought to an end by the declaration of Martial Law by General Zia ul Haque.²⁵¹

The Afghan War in 1979-80 precipitated an expansion of the non-profit sector's presence in Pakistan, along with a liberal flow of foreign funds. The perception that the government could not provide social services to the people saw the growth of small and large non-profit organisations in the country. The sector also developed because of the effects of the aftermath of the Afghan War, whereby international donor organisations and NGOs were set up for relief and emergency services for the refugees from Afghanistan. This period also saw greater visibility for advocacy organisations that supported human rights and women's rights. Organisations such as the Women's Action Forum (WAF), the Pakistan Institute of Labour Education and Research (PILER), focussed their work in response to the martial law regime and its suppression of human rights. The trend of the growth of the non-profit sector grew in the 1990's as well. A policy shift in favour of the non-profit sector involved in the delivery of social services allowed the funds from the government as well as donor agencies to increase substantially.²⁵² The growth of service delivery NGOs in the 80s is evident in a survey of 2000 NGOs conducted in 2001 by the Social Policy and Development Centre (SPDC), showing that

²⁵¹ *ibid*, pp.5-6

²⁵² *ibid*, pp. 6-7

over 27% of the currently active organisations surveyed were established between 1978 and 1987. The 2001 SPDC survey estimates that over 54% of the organisations that were surveyed were established during 1988 and 2001. Liberalisation policies of the government, increased international funding and the emphasis of donor agencies to promote the role of the NGO have collectively contributed to the growth of NGOs in Pakistan²⁵³ A recent survey estimates 56219 NGOs operating in Pakistan in the year 2000.²⁵⁴

Types of NGOs operating in Pakistan

In a working paper assigned by the Johns Hopkins Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project (CNP) to understand the scope, structure, and role of the nonprofit sector in 40 countries, Ghaus-Pasha-Iqbal use the term “non profit sector” to discuss the variety of voluntary organizations, associations, agencies; welfare organizations; societies; trusts; foundations and cooperatives that operate in the country. They explain that the term “non profit sector” is not used widely in Pakistan and that the terms “NGOs” and “CBOs” (Community Based Organisations) have also attained greater recognition in society and are used more commonly to describe voluntary and nonprofit organizations.

The Ghaus-Pasha-Iqbal report on the non-profit sector in Pakistan defines broadly two categories of organisations. One that is unorganised and the other organised. The unorganised sector comprises of small, unregistered groups that work at the grassroots level. The organised sector comprises of organisations that are characterised by their activities, the way in which they are managed or operate and the laws under which they are registered. These may include umbrella NGOs, national non-profit and mid-level organisations and grassroots level organizations. The organised sector also includes some small NGOs, Community Based Organisations (CBOs) and some grassroots level organisations that may not be registered. While these have a visible structure and working methodology, they prefer to remain unregistered because they already have recognition and based on the record of their work are able to receive funds without being registered.

²⁵³ Pasha, A., Jamal, H. and Iqbal, A., *Dimensions of the Nonprofit Sector in Pakistan (Preliminary estimates)*, Social Policy and Development Centre Pakistan, Aga Khan Foundation Pakistan and Centre for Civil Society Studies, Johns Hopkins University USA, 2002, pp.22-32

²⁵⁴ *ibid*, p.8

The above-cited working paper divides NGOs in Pakistan into four categories:

Category 1:

Type	Examples
National level	International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN)
Capacity building	World Wide Fund (WWF) (<i>environment</i>)
Research	Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI) (<i>research and advocacy</i>)
Advocacy	Social Policy and Development Center (SPDC) (<i>research</i>)
Funding organisations	NGO Resource Centre (NGORC) (human resource development)
	Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) (<i>human rights, legal aid</i>)
	Citizen-Police Liaison Committee (CPLC) (<i>human rights, legal aid</i>)

Category 2:

These work with communities to establish community based organisations, encourage participatory development, support development projects

Type	Examples
Support Organisations	Strengthening Participatory Organizations (SPO)
	South Asia Partnership Pakistan (SAP Pak)

Category 3:

These attract funds from donors or the government. Act as channels for funding to smaller NGOs, and CBOs that deliver services.

Type	Examples
Umbrella NGOs	Family Planning Association of Pakistan
	The Population Council
	Trust for Voluntary Organizations

National Rural Support Program (*micro credit for income generation, land development, poverty alleviation, education, health*)

Category 4:

These offer service delivery such as basic education, health, family planning.

Type

Small local organizations

Mid level NGOs²⁵⁵

The problematics of NGOs in Pakistan

Zaidi describes the rise of a considerable number of NGOs in under developed countries to be part of the concept that development needs to be sustainable, participatory and democratic. While NGOs are considered to be the best channel by donor agencies for the distribution of funds as well as the spread of new ideas regarding social and economic development, they are expected to undertake all issues that the private or state sector cannot address in developing countries. In rejecting all matters that were connected to the state, donor agencies identified NGOs in a large way to disseminate their funds. This notion of development has also defined a new role for the civil society.²⁵⁶

Qadeer speaks of the civil society and its strengthening to be a point of focus in the development agenda. In discussing the evolution of the civil society in Pakistan, he quotes a 1997 World Bank report that sees a very active role for the civil society in the reconstruction of the state. He describes this “strengthening of civil society” as a new element in the development paradigm whereby funding agencies such as USAID and CIDA are generously disseminating funds to NGOs to promote good governance. However, as Qadeer points out, this paradigm extends beyond the scope of development planning in economic development, and encompasses social organisations and political culture as objects of development policy that also bring them within the range of interest. Qadeer describes civil society to be the “mediating

²⁵⁵ *ibid*, pp.7-10

²⁵⁶ S.Akbar Zaidi, *ibid*, pp.203-204

structure between society and state”, and a term that has come to mean NGOs, local communities interest groups that are outside the radius of the state and which encourage participation and the empowerment of the people in public affairs.²⁵⁷

Another concept that emerged within the development paradigm that supported funding of NGOs was that of “social capital”. But in an extensive survey covering 20 NGOs and 20 Voluntary Organisations (VO) in Pakistan, Masooda Bano argues that the policy of extending aid through NGOs in the South, “in the name of generating social capital and strengthening civil society” is in fact creating a negative impact, showing that organisations that receive aid have no members and also that the material aspirations created by the aid amongst the leaders of the NGOs is lowering their performance.^{258 259}

The concept of “social capital” has received considerable attention by theorists like Putnam and Coleman. Coleman's theorisation of social capital was one that highlighted the experiences of non-elite or marginalized communities who could benefit from it. Identifying the role of the family, religious institutions and kinship networks, he proposed that social structures were suited to the promotion of reciprocity, trust and individual action.²⁶⁰ Thus Coleman argues, if there is any external intervention such as government aid in time of need, social capital gets destroyed as people get less dependant on each other.²⁶¹ Putman explains social capital in relation to physical and human capital. Whereas physical capital may refer to physical objects, and human capital to properties of individuals, social capital refers to connections amongst individuals, social networks and the reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from these. Social capital is often closely related to the notion of “civic virtue”, except that the concept of social capital emphasises that civic virtue is the strongest when it is embedded in a network of social

²⁵⁷ Mohammad Qadeer, “The Evolving Structure of Civil Society and the State in Pakistan”, *The Pakistan Development Review*, 36:4, Part II, Winter 1997, pp. 744-745

²⁵⁸ Masooda Bano., “Dangerous Correlations: Aid's Impact on NGOs' Performance and Ability to Mobilise Members in Pakistan”, *World Development*, Vol.36, Issue 11, November 2008, p.1

²⁵⁹ Bano selected these organisations on the basis of their scale of operation, budgets, funding, and reputations amongst donors, government organisations, media and research intuitions. These organisations were identified after discussions with 17 prominent donor agencies operating in Pakistan, and are distributed across all provinces and focus on broadly 7 to 8 areas of interest. Ibid, p.5

²⁶⁰ Mark. K. Smith, (2007) 'Social capital', *the encyclopaedia of informal education*, www.infed.org/biblio/social_capital.htm, accessed 19 August 2008

²⁶¹ Bano, *ibid*, p.1

relations. Therefore, he explains, a society with many virtuous but isolated individuals is not necessarily rich in social capital.²⁶² Supporting these arguments, Bano's survey of 40 civil society organisations in Pakistan shows that development aid is leading to organisations that have no members, a key component of social capital.

The development paradigm gives special emphasis to the idea of social capital. Bano argues that this concept is dealt with in a very narrow manner by the development institutions. With emphasis on participation as a key concept in the notion of social capital, Bano quotes a World Bank policy document that propagates social capital because it encourages people to work together and facilitates collective action. The three key factors are noted as promotion of public consensus and local ownership, representation of the voices of primary and secondary stakeholders, and improving public transparency.²⁶³

Numerous analysts have observed the failure of the NGOs to meet their purported objectives, and the very fact that the NGOs are a creation of funding agencies is considered as a major explanation towards their failure.²⁶⁴ In the studies on the subject, it is evident that NGOs drawing on development aid are often unable to mobilise their members and become an object of public distrust. Identified as organisations that create an elite amongst a society, NGOs fail to build a horizontal network and grassroots initiatives and are more immersed in building vertical institutional networks that isolate the community. Given that NGOs have to be accountable to their donors, they reduce their attention towards local accountability to the communities they serve.²⁶⁵

The twenty NGOs identified in Bano's paper are distinct from the 20 Voluntary Organisations (VO) in that the former draw on international development and the latter do not. The common thread that brings them together in Bano's research is that both NGOs and VOs represent organisations that serve constituencies that are external to themselves, are not grassroots organisations and work for the interest of their own members. The difference

²⁶² Smith, M.K, *ibid*

²⁶³ Bano, *ibid*, p.3

²⁶⁴ S.Akbar Zaidi, *ibid*, pp.203-204

²⁶⁵ Bano, *ibid*, p.2

between the two is that NGOs are reliant on development aid and the VOs are outside the donor chain.

Bano's comparative arguments support the strengths of the VOs compared to the weaknesses of NGOs because of the independent nature of the former and the dependence and reliability of the latter on the funding organisations.

One of the main problems that is seen within the NGO model in Pakistan is the inability to mobilise local members. In Bano's study, compared to the VOs, which rely on local donations and volunteer work, NGOs attract temporary volunteers in the form of interns who join the organisations with the sole intention of gaining experience in the development sector. NGOs also do not make efforts to induct local members since they are more focussed on providing the required services to their donor organisations. Another reason that works to their disadvantage is the negative perception that is inspired about them in Pakistan. On a performance level the elite offices of the NGOs are criticised for their inaccessibility to the ordinary citizen, and on an ideological level, they are blamed for their lack of commitment and total acceptance of western values. In another comparative example, Bano's study shows that in the 20 VOs she surveyed, the motivation to initiate the VO came from a local response to a particular issue or incident and a need to address a situation. In comparison, her study of 20 NGOs shows a varied set of reasons that are mostly motivated by monetary benefits. Compared to the ideological incentives that motivate the VOs, the NGOs indicated material incentives for the initiators. Six out of 20 of the NGOs in her study were initiated because a foreign development project closed down and the exiting foreign donor assisted the local staff to set up a local NGO so that their training and resources would be put to use. Thus those who had joined an organisation to earn a living ended up heading an NGO for a very isolated reason. With the exception of one NGO, all the initiators were ensured a good income in setting up an NGO. While Bano makes it clear that discussing monetary incentives as a means to set up an NGO cannot clearly question the motivations of NGOs, it does however make it difficult to test whether the NGOs were set up because of their own commitment or because of the founders' skills and knowledge of acquiring

funding for projects or issues that are on top of the donors' agendas. This link between NGO initiation and the availability of donor funding does leave the matter open to question.²⁶⁶

Another issue that is raised by Bano is the variability of NGOs towards their beneficiaries. Compared to the consistent work of VOs to their beneficiary population in her study, Bano finds that NGOs had changing targets and no particular commitment to their beneficiaries, and their aims were determined by the funding they received for a given developmental project. Comparing advocacy work of the NGOs to the service delivery agenda of the VOs, Bano finds that the VOs are more political in their approach. For the VOs that are more advocacy based, the concept of "community mobilisation" was equated to political mobilisation with the employment of public rallies or demonstrations to demand for equal distribution of economic growth within a society. For the NGOs, the term "community mobilisation" was seen as less confrontational and a more non-political term. While NGOs engaged in the publication of brochures, the holding of seminars and conferences, the VOs relied on heavy protests such as walks, sit-ins and demonstrations.

More importantly, the influx of donor money in Pakistan has also created a hold on the NGOs by the funding organisations. Trends are evident in Bano's survey which sees a shift in interest from one issue to another from the 1980's in Pakistan. A study of annual reports of NGOs shows an emphasis on women's rights in Pakistan in the 80's, micro credit in the early 90's, and community mobilisation and empowerment in the late 90's onwards, to current trends in devolution and governance. All the NGOs in her study show a following of these trends, showing that these organisations follow the preferences of the funding bodies. Officials at NGOs also express sentiments that determine their role to be contractual, and with the exception of a few large NGOs, identify the rest to shift agendas from year to year depending on the funding.²⁶⁷

The non-political approach of NGOs is also very evident as events unfolded in Pakistan's recent history, post 9/11. Bano's survey found a complete absence of critique on

²⁶⁶ Bano, *ibid*, pp.6-9

²⁶⁷ Bano, *ibid*, pp.9-13

General Musharraf's military regime by the NGOs in the case studies of her survey. One of the reasons for this could be accounted for in the influence international donors have on the NGOs. Despite the fact that participation and good governance are key debates in the work of NGOs, none of the NGOs surveyed actively participated in the democracy vs. military debate. Given Musharraf's active participation in the "war on terror", since September 11, a lot of major international donors had been very supportive of his regime. Given that devolution was the current area of interest (as mentioned earlier) for donor organisations since the late nineties, a large part of donor funding was being given to NGOs through the devolution plan.

The Pakistan Devolution Plan, also known as the Local Government Plan, was part of a plan to establish "genuine democracy" at the grassroots level throughout the country, and was announced on March 23, 2001. It is a system that aims to integrate the rural and urban local governments as well as the bureaucracy and local governments to form one cohesive structure. The official website for this system describes this political structure as one that integrates the civil society's involvement in development. One of its clear objectives is described as "...sustainable development and credible improvement in the delivery of services, through devolution of power and responsibility and decentralization of authority to the district". The plan required the establishment of a three-tier local government system in every district of Pakistan. Each level consisted of the District, *Tehsil* and Union, comprised of a *Nazim* (Administrator), a *Naib Nazim* (Sub-Administrator), its elected body, and its administrative structure. Grassroots organizations were introduced to involve people more actively in community development. It is described as a system that provides for monitoring the functioning of the government and delivery of services by the citizens and their representatives at all levels. The donors that support this programme through technical and financial aid are the Asian Development Bank (ADB), The Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), the Department for International Development (DFID), the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).²⁶⁸

²⁶⁸ http://www.pakdevolution.com/pak_dev_plan.htm, accessed 20 August 2008

Since a lot of financial aid to the NGOs was coming in from donor organisations through this devolution plan, none of the NGOs was prepared to criticise General Musharraf's government or advocate its removal at the risk of the withdrawal of funds. USAID, one of the major funding organisations that was dispersing projects through NGOs, had returned to Pakistan after withdrawing in 1980 as a gesture of support to Musharraf's government. The massive influx of funds has seen NGO budgets multiply enormously. One NGO's budget is quoted to have increased 29 times from roughly 1 million rupees to 29 million rupees, another's from 11 million to 40 million in 2003-4. (At the time of this survey the exchange rate was Rs 100 = £1/-, which has increased now to about Rs 140/- to £1/-). Given the influx of these funds, no NGO was likely to raise criticisms about the government and work against the donor agendas.

While this strongly reflects the influence of the donor on an NGO agenda, this was not the only reason for their lack of participation on the subject. In Bano's survey, a director of one of the largest advocacy NGOs also admitted silence or apathy towards the LFO (a collection of constitutional amendments which legitimised Musharraf's rule) simply because project workloads prevent the NGO from focussing attention anywhere other than their areas of interest. This too indirectly reflects the influence of the donors as NGOs are occupied in meeting project guidelines and do not divert even if they have an ideological stand on the issue. Having said that however, it was also evident in the survey that NGOs were only willing to work on any defined area of interest until the funds lasted and did not commit to projects beyond the funding period.²⁶⁹

Community Theatre in the work of *Raasti* – Karachi

I now turn my attention to the practice of *Raasti* (tr. The path of truth) theatre that focuses primarily on community theatre for projects organised by donors and has worked as a contractual NGO for various organisations before turning its attention to a more extensive project with PLAN Pakistan in the last few years.

***Raasti* - History**

²⁶⁹ Bano, *ibid*, pp.13-14

Established in 1995 by Sardar Francis Rufi, *Raasti* has an extensive repertoire of plays created and produced for a host of organisations that work in Pakistan. Working as an independent NGO. *Raasti* has in its 10 year career, worked with organisations that include SCF (Save the Children Pakistan), UNAIDS (The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS), CSS (Christian Social Services), UNICEF and most recently, PLAN Pakistan (an International NGO that "...aims to achieve lasting improvements in the quality of life of deprived children in developing countries...")²⁷⁰

Prior to starting *Raasti*, Rufi had some experience in working with various organisations and training in CBO formation. His ten-year experience of working with various NGO's encouraged him to initiate a local CBO in his own locality at a time when Karachi was afflicted by the most violent political strife. The unrest in the city discouraged people from moving out of their localities after 5pm and tensions were high amongst the communities that remained restricted to their homes. Rufi used his experience of role-play and mobilised local groups to talk about their issues. His network spread on an informal basis and he extended his outreach to a few more neighbouring localities, assisted by volunteers who shared his interest. Simultaneously, Rufi aimed to network with larger organisations intending to create a service that would train individuals in organisations to incorporate theatre and role-play in their work methods. This idea did not receive much response, but Rufi did however receive his first project of conducting a theatre workshop himself for the Catholic Social Services (CSS) in 1994. He established a formal theatre group *Galli Tamasha* (Street Theatre) under the jurisdiction of CSS, but found that once the project was over, CSS was unwilling to give it a permanent role in its working methodology. Rufi disassociated himself from the group and along with a few volunteers established *Raasti*.²⁷¹

The work completed with CSS did receive some notice from other organisations that commissioned *Raasti* to similar conduct workshops or plays within their own areas of interest. The subject matters dealt with the environment, sexual health, family planning, issues amongst the youth, and the organisations included The Mary Stopes Society (Family Planning plays

²⁷⁰ "Plan's Mission", www.plan-international.org/action/development accessed 27 February 2006

²⁷¹ Interview, Sardar Francis Rufi, *Raasti* Theatre Karachi. 17 February 2006.

1995), and *Aahung* (Sexual Health plays). A 1996-7 play on children's education caught the attention of Save the Children Fund UK (SCFUK) in a theatre festival in Karachi and this initiated a working relationship with this organisation that lasted for three years. It was on SCFUK's insistence that *Raasti* got itself registered as an NGO to facilitate transfer of funds for the project. Simultaneous to this project *Raasti* got the opportunity to work for an AIDS awareness project initiated by UNAIDS for a short three month duration. It involved groundwork with 5 communities, raising of awareness about the issue and culminated in a play based on the workings of the workshop. This was followed by a very extensive project on AIDS awareness with UNICEF (1999 - 2001) which extended *Raasti's* outreach to nearly 250 cities and towns all over Pakistan. The expanse of the project allowed *Raasti* to construct three similar teams of six persons each so that the play could be taken to three different regions of the country simultaneously. This was followed by a two-year project of issues concerning Youth, commissioned by the American Consulate (2002-3), and currently a project concerning children's rights with Plan Pakistan (PP).²⁷²

Through following *Raasti's* work pattern since its inception, it is relatively evident that non-governmental organisations that are working in Pakistan are substantially influential in determining work patterns and methodology of the NGOs that work with them. With a history of working with several organisations, *Raasti* falls into the slot of contractual workers who meet the demand of various NGOs and their agendas. Theatre for Development is seen as an effective tool by the donors for aiding and assisting organisations to reach out to communities.

It is evident that *Raasti's* capacity to work with local communities and build networks was what NGOs identified as suitable within their own working agenda. *Raasti's* use of Theatre for Development was considered a useful tool to discuss and debate issues that were otherwise difficult to confront in conservative communities. The methodology of being involved with a given community, and slowly familiarising people towards an issue was a useful yet playful tool towards accepting issues that needed to be addressed. Evidentially *Raasti's* methods were more suitable to NGOs like UNAIDS or SCF, where community members were made aware of

²⁷² *ibid*

various issues through role-play, interaction and sharing of ideas. The resulting play therefore was not necessarily the only ultimate goal in the process.

A quick survey of some of the NGOs that *Raasti* has worked with gives a picture of their objectives as well as the level of their funding. PLAN Pakistan, *Raasti's* current funding organisation is part of the International NGO (INGO) PLAN International network, which works primarily with children, their families, communities, organisations and local governments to implement programmes at grassroots level in health, education, water and sanitation, income generation and cross-cultural communication. The organisation works in 49 developing countries across Africa, Asia and the Americas. With its total income reaching nearly US\$600 million in 2007, its contributors are Europe, North America and Asia. The largest contribution from a European country comes from Germany in 2007, making up 16% of the annual income. PLAN's annual income has also increased from US\$ 426 in 2004 to the current stated figures in 2007 and its largest European contributor in 2004 was the Netherlands, accounting for 22% its income.²⁷³

Another donor for *Raasti* projects, UNAIDS (The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS), "brings together the efforts and resources of ten UN system organisations to the global AIDS response". Pakistan is currently classified by WHO and UNAIDS as a low prevalence but a high-risk country for the spread of HIV infections. The Enhanced HIV/AIDS Programme was launched in October 2003 with a credit from the World Bank. In addition, the government of Pakistan is collaborating with various organisations including DFID, CIDA, USAID, and the European Community on this issue.²⁷⁴

The UK based charity Save The Children Fund UK (SCFUK) started its programme in Pakistan in 1979 and its early work was motivated towards building up a national programme of projects around health, education and rural development. Since 1995, it has changed its approach from delivering services to building partnerships with local organisations and

²⁷³ PLAN International, www.plan-international.org/about/finance/ accessed 27 February 2006 and 23 August 2008

²⁷⁴ UNAIDS, www.unaids.org accessed 27 February 2006

government institutions. SCF focuses its work primarily on education, child labour, children in emergencies, child protection and citizenship. Its 2004-5 income of £133.9 million was largely raised through donations, gifts, legacies and grants.²⁷⁵ SCF has used Theatre for Development as a tool for awareness spreading campaigns and considers it a process of inquiry towards attitudes and concerns. The process involves decision making by the children as well as by the audience so that the process is continual in its development.²⁷⁶

One can observe *Raasti's* own work history of working with numerous NGOs that it has relied heavily on the funding support lent to it by these organisations, and shifted focus from one issue to another catering to the varying demands of its donors. While the group's work remains consistent in its intention to reach out to the communities, this aspect loses its continuity when the project ends and there is no longer any communication with the people it worked with. Hence its status is relegated to being a service that donors may offer a contract to in order to fulfil its own agenda within an area or community. *Raasti's* projects prescribe to Zaidi's descriptions of time bound and project specific NGO tasks that are narrowly specified and lack continuity because of their short-term nature.²⁷⁷ When similar NGO funded projects were undertaken by *Tehrik e Niswan*, as I will discuss later, these too reflected similar concerns of being narrowly specified by the donors and remained restricted to the allotted time frame dedicated to the project.

The specific and narrow objectives of the NGOs are reflected in Junaid Ahmad's essay: He argues, "[...] one will rarely see the NGOs [...] in Pakistan and Bangladesh transcend their exclusive and narrow, although well-intentioned causes such as protection of the environment, women's rights, minority rights [...] and champion the cause of oppressed people and call for massive socio economic changes in the society. These NGOs will rarely implore their

²⁷⁵ SCFUK, www.savethechildren.org.uk accessed 17 February 2006

²⁷⁶ An extensive report on one such project (Health Promotion in Adolescents for HIV/AIDS Prevention) involving Theatre for Development is available on the SCF website. The project involved seven schools from Pakistan.

²⁷⁷ S. Akbar Zaidi, *ibid*, p.213

governments to embark on a path of independent and sustainable development by massively investing in health, education, social welfare, and industrial and agricultural development [...]”²⁷⁸

***Raasti's* Current project with PLAN Pakistan**

When I spoke to Rofi in 2006, he had just initiated the project with PLAN Pakistan (PP). Given the extensive range of organisations that he had worked with, I expected to find a longer list this time, only to find that he had been working exclusively with PLAN Pakistan since then who have extended their outreach to three specific cities, Vehari, Mansera and Chakwal in the Punjab province.

Before being inducted on a yearly contract with PLAN Pakistan, *Raasti* had done a project with them that yielded positive results in fulfilling targets. In a project entitled “Ensuring Children’s Participation in Development” in the Health component, PP had devised a booklet on Preventive Health based on 6 chapters. While PP’s workers had taken this booklet in their constituencies, it was introduced like a textbook with little activity around the subject. *Raasti* was hired to implement the understanding of the contents of this booklet with interactive activities, apart from theatre. A poster making competition, story telling sessions and theatre project was used by *Raasti* for three months in 10 villages. The culmination of this project in Vehari and an exhibition that showcased the results led to an offer of a “partnership” by PP. This project has since extended to Vehari (28 villages), Chakwal and Mansera (50 villages), (which now stands aborted because of a bomb attack at the PP office in early 2008).

The 2005 earthquake in the northern areas of Pakistan prompted a flow of funds to the region and an influx of donor agencies and NGOs for relief work. Apart from working with PP on its extended relief operation areas, *Raasti* also developed a relationship with other NGOs in the Vehari region and conducted small projects or “consultancies” as Rofi refers to them, around that time. Other organisations *Raasti* worked with were Health Net TPO (Transcultural Psychosocial Organisation)²⁷⁹, Relief International²⁸⁰, and World Vision²⁸¹

²⁷⁸ Junaid S. Ahmad, *ibid*

²⁷⁹ Healthnet International TPO is a Netherlands based knowledge-driven, non-profit organization that works in areas disrupted by war, disasters and poverty. It works with local populations and channels

Raasti's work process with PP involves community mobilisation, group formation and forum organisation amongst children, monitoring activities planned for children and making evaluation reports for the same. Some of the modules, or "interventions" as they are referred to that *Raasti* engages in are Adolescence Reproductive Health (ARH), Community Children Eye Health Project and Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD).

Raasti uses theatre in both its adult and children's components of work. Subjects within PP's scope of interest are integrated through theatre activities with school children, as this is a medium that children are very receptive to. Through story telling and drama writing, *Raasti* employs subjects like Health and Hygiene to fulfil PP's agenda. Children are led through role playing processes in themes around health and prevention and work towards the building of a short play. Another aspect of its work is around raising community awareness amongst adults in areas like family planning and is conducted by adult members of *Raasti's* team. Often such activities, be it plays or presentations are conducted for male and female audiences separately. Given the extent of the project, *Raasti* has now established permanent teams in both Vehari and Chakwal and actors for plays are inducted from teams that are either established in these places or have been inducted from the local areas. This leads to the need of "capacity building" within the *Raasti* team, and new members are initiated into the tools and methodologies *Raasti* employs. New inductees are trained to understand notions such as "participatory methodology", "participatory research", "community mobilisation" and "community development". These ideas along with the tools of creating reports and evaluations are often incorporated in workshops that are conducted by *Raasti* for new team members from time to time.

This specific use of terms and terminologies is in character with Bano's indication of a feature employed by NGOs towards what she calls "development lingo". The use of terms in line

emergency aid into sustainable health care development.

<http://www.peopleinaid.org/membership/member.aspx?member=107> , accessed 21 August 2008

²⁸⁰ Relief International was founded in 1990, and provides emergency, rehabilitation and development services that empower beneficiaries in the process. RI's programs include health, shelter construction, education, community development, agriculture, food, income-generation, and conflict resolution.

<http://ri.org/about.php> accessed 21 August 2008

²⁸¹ World Vision is a Christian relief, development and advocacy organisation dedicated to working with children, families and communities to overcome poverty and injustice. <http://www.worldvision.org.uk> accessed 21 August 2008

with the vocabulary of international development agencies is indicative of the integration NGOs wish to conduct to be part of the development sector. While Bano finds that the understanding of terminologies and concepts was restricted to a few NGOs, the use of the jargon itself was widespread across the NGO spectrum.²⁸² Clearly this is evident in Rufi's conversation with me in the second interview conducted in 2008 in which there is a defined use of terminologies that was very much in sharp contrast to the interview I conducted two years ago.

Raasti's challenges in the development sector

Raasti is engaged by PLAN Pakistan on a yearly contract basis and each year's progress and evaluations determine the extension of a contract. *Raasti* prepares a proposal document for every following year based on the current year's "challenges" and develops a new programme accordingly. This is sent to PP for approval and contract extensions. Project proposals are entirely implemented upon PP's approval and often certain proposals are denied because they fall outside the scope of PP's mandate. The insecurity this presents to *Raasti* in terms of renewal is a matter of concern for them. Apart from the fact that the scope of their work was reduced because of the Mansera offices being closed down, *Raasti* depends largely on the approval of PP CBOs established in its constituencies for recommendations. The CBOs established by PP comprise of village representatives in the given areas and their feedback holds a great deal of importance in PP's work. According to Rufi, should a CBO member decide to add a negative comment about *Raasti* in its feedback to PP, there is a strong possibility that their contract can be cancelled abruptly. Such experiences with other partner NGOs have been witnessed in the past by Rufi and this enhances the insecurity that their work entails. So, despite Rufi's approach of working with one donor consistently for a period of time and strengthen his profile in the development sector, he finds that this method presents its own set of problems. Should a donor leave an area, or decide to cancel a contract, *Raasti's* work can come to an abrupt end and dislodge their financial planning for the year.²⁸³

Edwards and Hulme question whether the funding of NGOs by donors changes the nature of NGOs' relationships with donors from partnership to contractual. This switch from

²⁸² Bano, *ibid*, p.11

²⁸³ Interview, Sardar Francis Rufi, *Raasti* Theatre Karachi. 05 August 2008

partner to contractor creates a fundamental change in the value base of the relationship, making the legitimacy of the NGO based not upon values and voluntarism, but on its contract to a legitimate agency. The claim for legitimacy makes its role like that of a private sector operator, aiming to provide service at the best price.²⁸⁴

Raasti's attempts to invent project modules which may not receive approval from PP because they are outside the scope of their work, move it in the direction of integrating activities that are suitable within PP's range of work. Despite being a theatre company, *Raasti's* work with PP does not entail theatre only. In fact Rufi states clearly that PP does not support theatre activity in its own right. *Raasti* has the possibility to integrate it as a tool within their projects, and enhance its use wherever possible, but there is no separate funding for theatre in any of PP's agendas. Much as Rufi would like to dedicate funds to train children in specialised areas of theatre, this is an impossibility in PLAN Pakistan's agenda²⁸⁵. As a result theatre is integrated amongst activities like poster making, story telling or role-play to extend the scope of results. This is voiced by Edwards and Hulme as an issue faced by many NGOs whereby they state that if any activity of an NGO does not fit into a donor agenda, the NGO in a bid not to lose out may give in by taking on functions that which they know will attract funding, often to the detriment of other aspects of their mission.²⁸⁶ Alnoor Ebrahim expresses a similar view where he finds that this control of NGOs by donors through performance assessments lends donors a sense of control through which they "reward" NGOs that stick to a proven, product based approach to development and punish those with more innovative approaches through the revocation of funds.²⁸⁷ The annual renewal of *Raasti's* contract is based on what Ebrahim calls a "tool for facilitating accountability", by which a donor or a larger NGO evaluates the performance of a smaller or partner NGO. This form of external evaluation of an NGO near the end of a grant or program aims to assess whether a project has been achieved and to what extent the objectives have been met before determining the future funding of an NGO. These appraisals may assess short-term results of NGO interventions in terms of outputs (training programmes offered) or

²⁸⁴ Edwards and Hulme, *ibid*, p.967

²⁸⁵ Interview Rufi, *ibid*

²⁸⁶ Edwards and Hulme, *ibid*, p.966

²⁸⁷ Alnoor Ebrahim, *ibid*, p.817

long-term results (impacts, outcomes, improvement in clients' health, income etc).²⁸⁸ Subjected to these evaluations, it is understandable from PP's point of view why *Raasti* is employed on a yearly contract. While PP through its mandate works with a community for ten years so that it can achieve results, *Raasti* has to work on a year-by-year basis because there is no specific guarantee that its contract will be renewed each year. Both these ideas, the insecurity of withdrawal of funds, and the integration of more proven strategies is clearly evident in *Raasti's* work. In a bid to extend the scope of their work, *Raasti* proposed a project to create 8 documentaries to fit within PP's newly established media component under the title "Video for Change". Proposing a project that would integrate the acting skills of the children they have worked with, *Raasti* aimed to create these videos integrating the community. This proposal was rejected by PP.²⁸⁹

Rufi cites a similar example in the past when he was working in a SCFUK funded project with children on raising awareness on children's rights. *Raasti* found requests from within the community to facilitate the opening of a school, as the locality did not have one. When Rufi took the concern back to SCFUK to see if some of the funds for the project could be re routed to facilitate a small school, his request was turned down on the basis that his work pertained to awareness training and the project could not provide services to the community.²⁹⁰

Apart from the tests the work itself presents, *Raasti* encounters challenges in its work with PP in gaining acceptance by the community itself and battling the contest in hierarchy with the CBOs that are established in the areas where PP works. In PP's methodology, it sets up a CBO comprising of local elders or community representatives in each area it works in. The role of the CBO is to act as a mediator between the NGO and the community and establish contact building within the community. Even though *Raasti* considers itself an expert partner in its capacity of work with PP, it finds it difficult to gain independence from the CBOs as they hold a powerful position in PP's work plan and are directly involved in the project approval process. For every new proposal or "intervention" *Raasti* must first receive a Project Output Delivery Form

²⁸⁸ Alnoor Ebrahim, *ibid*, pp.816-817

²⁸⁹ Interview Rufi, *ibid*

²⁹⁰ Interview, Sardar Francis Rufi, *Raasti* Theatre, 17 February 2006

that is signed by two or three members of the CBO, before PP will even venture to look at it. Every project depends on the issuance of this form and therefore *Raasti* as a partner finds itself in the third tier of hierarchy after PP itself and the CBOs. On PLAN Pakistan's part this is verified by the fact that the CBOs and the community are partners for ten years whereas *Raasti's* contract is an annually renewable one. The acceptability that *Raasti* wishes to gain in its projects through direct contact with PP is channelled in this system through the CBO's presence and its assurances or approvals about *Raasti* to PP. In this contest, *Raasti* has also faced some opposition from either a CBO member or a community member towards its plays that have been marked as "vulgar" because of the inclusion of songs, or the integration of certain issues that may not be socially acceptable within a community. In such a situation, PP first tried to resolve the conflict through dialogue, after which it may either succumb to the community demands or in other extreme situations, threaten the community with a revocation of its activities from the constituencies. This latter instance was seen in a conflict regarding development work in a certain village.²⁹¹

In this system of evaluation, be it external (evaluation of NGO performance by funding bodies) or internal (internal evaluation by NGOs themselves), Ebrahim identifies a conflict amongst the NGOs about whether more emphasis should be placed upon the *processes* (participation, empowerment) or whether it should be orientated towards more tangible *products* (for example, number of schools built). In his study he finds that donors tend to emphasise more tangible and quantifiable results – the products, over the more ambiguous and less tangible process based measures.²⁹² This is evident in Rofi's description of PP's working methodology, where there is an emphasis on "software" and "hardware", translated into what Ebrahim refers to *processes* and *products* respectively. The software translates into for example "behavioural change, information dissemination" whereas the hardware translates into "number of schools built, roads constructed, bridges built" etc. This translates swiftly into *Raasti's* own performance records, whereby the number of children they initially started working with was roughly 25 but has increased over the years to 400-500. In a system of accountability to PP, *Raasti's* has made a detailed report for a Community Children Eye Health Project which categorises the

²⁹¹ Interview Rofi, 2008

²⁹² Ebrahim, *ibid*, p.817

number of children screened for eye problems, the number treated, the number that were given eye glasses, the number that were given medicine and the number that were operated upon. This database conforms to the product of quantifiable results discussed earlier. The product-based result is also, according to Rofi, better received within the community and CBOs because the results are tangible. Thus a newly constructed school will attract more positive response than a given training session with *Raasti* since it may have more long-term process based objectives.²⁹³ While this system of evaluation and the relationship *Raasti* has with PP is unique in its demands, *Raasti* has in the past worked with other NGOs such as UNICEF and SCFUK which may have had a more relaxed attitude to project reports and evaluations compared to PP, which maintains a unit to monitor the work and progress of its partners regularly.

Najam describes the notion of *participation* as a way in which the NGOs express their accountability to the community. Categorised as a *process* this notion is often misused and misunderstood. In examining the notion of participation, Ebrahim makes four distinctions between types of participation. Of these, he identifies two as “information about a planned project” (through public meetings, surveys) and “public involvement” (consultation with community members, but keeping the decision making in the hands of project planners). The other two are based on more involvement with a community where members may contribute towards a project through providing labour or funds, and even negotiate over decisions. Of these Ebrahim identifies the first two that are used by NGOs and donors to form the assumption that poverty can be eliminated by increasing local access to resources and funds. In this mode of participation, Ebrahim finds that there is very little decision authority that is vested in the communities or clients, and projects are decided determined by NGOs before any level of participation occurs.²⁹⁴ This kind of participation is what Najam calls a “sham ritual” of choosing local functionaries and allowing already chosen objectives to be restated on the local vernacular”. He quotes a PLAN International Director of International Relations and Field Operations to define participation as “nothing more than allowing the local community to agree with what we [i.e. the NGO] already intend to do”. The purpose of participation then becomes

²⁹³ Interview Rofi, *ibid*

²⁹⁴ Ebrahim, *ibid*, p.818

what he describes as a “feel-good exercise for both the local community and the NGO”.²⁹⁵ This sentiment is evident in Rofi’s description of PLAN Pakistan’s intervention with the community in lending assistance to farmers in a Pest Management Program. Speaking of the community’s “negative” (or tentative) attitude towards the help lent to it, Rofi asserts that the introduction of a service in the form of an organisation called Integrated Pest Management (IPM) is something *the community should recognise as beneficial*. After all, this intervention, he explains will be an advantage to the community, because the people do not have technical information. And if the community responds by saying “we know what IPM does” (and therefore we can manage this ourselves), why, questions Rofi, did the farmers suffer losses in the past? And what did the evaluation reports show but benefits. Therefore, the community and the CBOs should understand that the presence of any NGO in their village is for our own development and well-being and that all the development work that is taking place is for their own benefit.²⁹⁶ Zaidi describes this approach of “thinking for the community” as one that overrules popular decisions. He quotes a World Bank report in which 57% projects that NGOs participated in were in the form of implementers, compared with 11 % as designers. This he argues makes the role of NGOs more that of “technical transfer agents or contractors for donors and governments”.²⁹⁷

Work methodology – How are the plays devised?

Raasti’s plays can be categorised in two sections. One which incorporates plays on themes that are more for discussion amongst an adult audience, (family planning, HIV Aids) and employs its actors from the community, and the other which devises plays for the understanding of a younger audience (health and hygiene, awareness about diseases and preventive measures) and uses children as actors. The adult team consists of actors that have been inducted from the community or are a part of *Raasti*’s permanent team and in this case, have settled in the two cities for the extent of the project. All adult members are first inducted in the program through *Raasti*’s training methodologies in participatory research, participatory methodology as discussed earlier. These along with theatre skills equip the team to devise and perform a play. The team consists mainly of men because of social restrictions and plays are worked in a

²⁹⁵ Najam, *ibid*, p.346

²⁹⁶ Interview Rofi, *ibid*

²⁹⁷ S. Akbar Zaidi, *ibid*, p.215

manner that a woman's presence is suggested or discussed through the dialogue. The children's plays are devised around discussing essential health related themes through PP's allocated booklets and working out a role playing methodology to understand and enact the contents of the material provided. The two plays that have currently been devised by *Raasti* for PP are based on themes of vaccinations and malaria. In devising a play with children, *Raasti* first discusses the "content knowledge" with the group of children that will perform the play. This is essential because the play must, according to the donor objectives carry certain clear messages and information.

Hence in the case of the play on malaria, "*Mein nu Thand Lagdi*" (I Feel Cold), content knowledge would imply discussing what kind of disease malaria is, how it is spread, what its symptoms are, and what are its methods of treatment and prevention. These issues are taken up in separate discussion forums with the children before initiating theatre-improvisation techniques. In this particular instance, children were asked to improvise the movements of a mosquito, and gradually role-playing methods developed the narrative as the mosquito bit a child and spread the disease. As one child was identified to play the protagonist, another played his mother, whose lack of knowledge made her ignore her son's symptoms. Other players in this narrative were developed as the mother took her son first to a sham healer, then a nurse upon the advise of her son's friend. Incidentally her son's friend ends up somewhat to be a spokesperson for PLAN Pakistan, as he explains that his knowledge about malaria was obtained during a forum that PP held in his village. Stylistically the play does not adapt any elements that embellish its form, except the introduction of a pair of characters (employed largely in folk or street entertainment), who act as a Master and his Subject. (This device is also seen used in *Tehrik e Niswan's Anji* when the Narrator transforms into a magician like figure and casts a spell on Anji's colleague at work.). The Master sends the Subject in a trance and makes him say or conduct actions that he would not in otherwise normal conditions. For want of a better word and an accurate translation I use the words "Baccha Jamhoora" (Child Jamhoora) exactly as it is used in the script in the following excerpt. The play is enacted in Seraiki, a dialect of Punjabi and performed mostly in Vehari. However its documentation is in Urdu. Rofi explains the reason behind this contradiction, as he says that each time the play is developed using

improvisation techniques, and so there is no constant script to adhere to. With every new group of children the process is repeated in the same manner, ensuring that all stages of the project are covered. Apart from the fact that the children would be unable to memorise the script, this also enables *Raasti* to run the entire process with every new set of children and therefore allow the content to be reinforced each time. The Urdu scripts are maintained for documentation, for their own records and for reports and evaluations by the donors.²⁹⁸

Mein nu Thand Lagdi, (I Feel Cold) – Raasti Theatre

I now add three excerpts from the *Raasti* play on Malaria, *Mein nu Thand Lagdi, (I Feel Cold)*, duration 10 minutes, which is divided into 5 short scenes.

- Sc 1: Preamble – The Master and Baccha Jamhoora
- Sc 2: The Court of the King of Diseases
- Sc 3: Sajid is healthy. He is getting ready to go to school. On the way he is bitten by a mosquito.
- Sc 4: 12 days later (this time span is related by a narrator, who does not have any other mention in the script). Sajid is unwell. His mother takes him to a Healer on a neighbour's advice. He remains unwell. Sajid's friend advises the mother to take him to a doctor instead and relates a speech on symptoms and preventive measures for malaria.
- Sc 5: The Master and Baccha Jamhoora conclude with a summary

Three Excerpts from *Mein nu Thand Lagdi*²⁹⁹

Sc1. Preamble: The Master and Baccha Jamhoora

Master: Baccha Jamhoora!

Baccha Jamhoora: Yes Master!

²⁹⁸ Interview Ruffi, ibid

²⁹⁹ Excerpts from original script *Mein nu Thand Lagdi (I Feel Cold)*, *Raasti Theatre*, Vehari, 2008. My translation from Urdu.

Master: Will you answer my questions?

Baccha Jamhoora: I will, Master

Master: Is the Moon further away or is Peshawar?

Baccha Jamhoora: Peshawar

Master: How is that?

Baccha Jamhoora: Master, you can see the Moon from here, but not Peshawar!

Master: Excellent Baccha!

Master: Baccha Jamhoora!

Baccha Jamhoora: Yes Master!

Master: Turn around!

Baccha Jamhoora: I turn

Master: Lie down

Baccha Jamhoora: I lie down

Master: Sit up!

Baccha Jamhoora: I sit up

Master: Stand up!

Baccha Jamhoora: I stand up

Master: Sway a little

Baccha Jamhoora: I sway a little

Master: Now tell me, why are all these people here?

Baccha Jamhoora: To see a play Master!

Master: So which play are you showing us all today?

Baccha Jamhoora: One mosquito... the damn thing! See what one mosquito can do to a human. Just one damn mosquito! Come Master. Let me show you as well.

From Sc 2. The court of the King of Diseases

King: Haa Haa Haa! I am the King of Diseases! I am Black Jaundice.
Haa Haa Haa! Begin the proceedings!

Whooping Cough: Here I come! Here I come! I bring Whooping Cough to every household! Salutations Your Majesty! Sire, I have surveyed the village. A hundred new children have been born. But their parents have already had them vaccinated for Whooping Cough. I never got a chance to attack them. But the time is not far when I will spread the menace of Whooping Cough in the entire village!

Polio: Haa Haa Haa I am Polio. They tried to get rid of me but I'm still here! Salutations Your Majesty! Sire, I tried really hard but could not succeed. On the one hand, the Government of Pakistan works with NGOs to distribute Polio drops amongst children to fight the disease. And on the other, parents inoculate their children against Polio. I tried very hard to hunt them down, but could not succeed. I beg for your forgiveness Sire!

(For the sake of brevity, I have edited this section where three more diseases present similar cases to the King)

King: You are all of no use to me! Useless lot. Now one only subject can do the job. It is my Anopheles mosquito. One damn mosquito! One mosquito can do the job. Wait and see.

From Sc 4. The Scene at Sajid's house

Sajid: Mother, I'm feeling very cold. Please do something. My body aches. Can you give me another blanket?

The Mother paces the room worriedly. Sits down with her head in her hands. Enter Sajid's friend.

Friend: Auntie, where is Sajid?

Mother: He is not well today my son. Why don't you go and play. He can't join you today.

Friend: What's the matter with him Auntie?

Mother: His body aches. He is breaking into cold sweats. He has a fever too. I gave him some medicine that was lying at home,

but it has had no effect. I even got an amulet made for him from the Healer

Friend: These seem to be symptoms of malaria. You should have taken him to a doctor instead of the Healer. You should have had his blood tested.

Mother: All right son. I'll take him to a doctor for sure tomorrow. But tell me, what are the preventive measures for malaria? So we know how to protect ourselves in the future.

Friend: Well Auntie, if the village has any bodies of still water or ponds, spray kerosene oil on them. Burn garbage heaps. If there are many mosquitoes in a place, burn leaves of the *Neem* tree so that the smoke drives them away. Sprinkle walls with oil. Keep your homes clean. Especially the utensils in which you eat, and make sure you wash them each time before use. Make sure children do not go near pools of stagnant dirty water. If someone has malaria, make sure to take him to a doctor, not a Healer or a saint!

Mother: Son, how do you know all this information?

Friend: Auntie, we are from the Children's Forum. Friends from PLAN Pakistan and *Raasti* come to our village and tell us good and useful things about health and cleanliness. They told us all this during our training sessions.

Mother: Thank you so much my son.

Sc 5 The Master and Baccha Jamhoora

Master: Baccha Jamhoora!

Baccha Jamhoora: Yes Master.

Master: This was excellent information!

Baccha Jamhoora: Yes Master! If everyone acted upon these instructions, they would not only be safe from malaria, but all the diseases that are born in unhygienic conditions.

It is quite evident from this script that the play does not aim to make this a literary piece of work, nor reference it with any folk or contemporary traditions of theatre. The script is written with a clear intention to fulfil the project demand that is set out by the donor NGO and this is what *Raasti* sets itself to do. The audience in such plays consists of mainly children, with some supervision from either community members or CBO members. The plays can be part of a monthly Children's event, and consists of students from boys' and girls' schools in the vicinity of the village. While most children's performances are held in non-segregated environments, the plays conducted for adults may consist of single gender audiences, depending on the theme under discussion or how conservative a community may be. The plays do not allow for audience interaction but do offer opportunities for discussion once a performance is over. Discussions usually pertain to a theme that is performed in a play, and are usually around the symptoms of diseases, preventive measures, and health and hygiene. Essentially the plays are highly appreciated and children often request feedback from audience members on how a play may be improved in its content or clarity of message.

Theatre as a Tool for Development in the work of Karachi based NGO *Aahung*

The NGO point of view

I now turn my attention to the Karachi based NGO *Aahung* which was established in 1995 and works towards improving the sexual health of men, women and adolescents. Their work

includes raising awareness and improving health-seeking behaviour to promote healthy relationships based on equality and respect.³⁰⁰

The reason for my choice of *Aahung* as a case study here is because the organisation has in the past few years turned its attention towards employing theatre as a tool in their development activities and also because of the involvement of some of its members in theatre training activities themselves. Shehneel Gill, their Senior Outreach Coordinator, has had some experience of training under *Raasti's* theatre workshops and has also facilitated the earlier workshops at *Aahung* himself. This said however, I find that the use of theatre as a tool for development has evolved in their repertoire as what seems to me, a tool of convenience. Whether it is employed because of practical reasons, or because the funds allow for its inclusion from year to year, it is not viewed as a long-term strategy, nor as a means to develop the efficacy of the method. It is made quite clear by both Gill and the Acting Director of *Aahung* Fatima Haider that they have in the past used theatre as a tool to raise awareness, but awareness raising is not a vital part of their work because *Aahung* is essentially a capacity building organisation that “works with institutions and organisations to help develop their capacity to respond to sexual health issues” and theatre is an activity that they have been doing “on the side”.³⁰¹ Having said that however, *Aahung* has in since 2004 conducted 2 training workshops cum health festivals and 3 festivals that incorporate theatre and is currently conducting an extensive performance festival in 10 communities in the interior Sindh (2008). This said there is no provision in their future strategies of the next three year financial proposal to include theatre in their work and *Aahung* seems set to now work through the electronic media, TV and radio channels.³⁰² The question raised then is, despite extensive projects that have a visible profile in their donor evaluations, does theatre simply become a tool that enhances or extends their portfolio and yet one that has failed to yield more quantitative results that NGOs are looking for?

³⁰⁰ <http://www.Aahung.org/about/index.htm> accessed 29 August 2008

³⁰¹ Interview, Fatima Haider, Acting Director *Aahung*, 20 August 2008

³⁰² Interview, Fatima Haider, *ibid*

Aahung's project campaigns

Breaking Walls 2003

The idea of employing theatre in *Aahung's* work emerged entirely on a need basis. *Aahung* has developed two printed manuals in English and Urdu through which it trains CBO workers on sexual health related issues. Through one such training session, a participant of the CBO VDWO (Village Development Welfare Organisation) from the Shikarpur District in Sindh came back with the feedback that although the material provided was very valuable, the CBO workers faced the obstacle of illiteracy amongst the community members who could not read or understand the material through conventional teaching methodologies. This led VDWO and *Aahung* to consider using theatre as means to communicate the ideas put forth in the manual in a medium which would be accessible to all. Given that *Aahung* members had some exposure to theatre through *Raasti* as well as through *Tehrik e Niswan* plays they had seen in the community environment, this option seemed a viable one. Gill offered to train the CBO members in a 5 day theatre workshop in 2003 and this led to a showcasing of the plays amongst other activities in what was called a Health Mela (Festival) in the Shikarpur District the same year. The festival was encouraged and funded by larger supporting organisations of VDWO, including *Aahung*.³⁰³ The Health Mela was a means to bring issues regarding sexual and reproductive health to a very conservative and largely illiterate community through entertainment orientated activities that involved everyone in the village. In fact the conservative nature of the community did not allow VDWO to induct women to perform in the play and male actors were used to play women in this campaign.³⁰⁴ The documentation of the festival in a DVD I have seen charts out a mixture of events that range from skits, speech contests, art competitions, quiz programmes, panel discussions as well as the showcasing of 4 plays which were prepared by 4 CBOs from the region. Titled "Breaking Walls", this project was the first in *Aahung's* history of employing theatre in its development work.³⁰⁵

³⁰³ Interview, Shehneel Gill, Senior Outreach Coordinator *Aahung*, 13 August 2008

³⁰⁴ It was only after *Aahung's* second theatre training and the emergence of some theatre groups representing CBOs in rural Sindh that VDWO was able to invite women from those CBOs to perform in some of their plays. Interview, Gill, *ibid*

³⁰⁵ *Breaking Walls, A Case Study on the use of Theatre for Development to promote Sexual Rights in Pakistan*, DVD, *Aahung*, 2004

Wohh Subha Tou Aaeye Gi (The Morning Will Emerge) 2004

This project also emerged on a need basis when the CBO Child Development Organisation (CDO) based in Johi Sindh, underwent a 5 day capacity building training with *Aahung*, using their manual "Aware For Life". The CBO faced the same problem as the previously mentioned VDWO as far as the literacy level and understanding of the Urdu language was concerned. The manual was produced in Urdu and the community based in rural Sindh speaks the regional Sindhi language. This concern led to the idea of using theatre once again in the communities to disseminate the information of the published text. This time a theatre practitioner was hired by *Aahung* in Karachi to facilitate a ten-day theatre workshop for members of the following organisations; CDO, VDWO, Marvi Women's Welfare Association, Shikarpur, Maroo Social Welfare Association, Mirzapur, and *Hayat e Nau* Hyderabad. The trainer, Mahmood Bhatti is a performer with *Tehrik e Niswan* and his experiences were valuable in inducting the CBO members into theatre as a language of expression. (In fact, as I will mention later, Bhatti also coordinated *Tehrik e Niswan's* very extensive community theatre programme on Honour Killings under the British Council's sponsorship in 2004 - 6). For the organisations invited by *Aahung* for this theatre workshop, training was provided by Bhatti, and the content knowledge was supervised by *Aahung's* team. In the ten-day workshop, 5 days were dedicated to initial theatre exercises, since the participants were themselves inhibited and lacked awareness of the language of theatre. The remaining 5 days were dedicated to developing plays for the final showcasing. Three theatre groups emerged from this workshop. One was connected to CDO and known as the CDO Theatre Group, the other, Smart Theatre based in Shikarpur and the third, *Hayat e Nau* (New Life) Theatre Group, (*HN*) from the organisation of the same name, based in Hyderabad. *HN* emerged as the most consistent of the three and developed a longer working relationship with *Aahung*. *Aahung* also claims a vital role in the development of *HN* as a theatre³⁰⁶. The group was connected to the CBO *Hayat e Nau* which works with children with disabilities.

³⁰⁶ Interview Shehneel Gill, *ibid*

Akhir Kyun (But Why?): Street Theatre for Raising Awareness 2006

The third campaign that emerged in *Aahung's* work was part of a joint effort of their Outreach team and the Research, Law and Policy (RLP) component. This now no longer existent component was responsible for raising awareness amongst policy makers, legal service providers and the general public.³⁰⁷ This campaign had other levels of outreach apart from theatre. A poster campaign on gender discrimination and sexual harassment was initiated and two posters were printed in large numbers and disseminated in various parts of the city. The Urdu text on the posters translated, "Whether it's a boy or girl, the upbringing should be the same" and "It may be fun for you, but it's a punishment for them" supported with clear visual images that conveyed the messages.³⁰⁸ These ideas also represented the themes that were identified by *Aahung* for the theatre campaign. By now, with some experience behind them, *Aahung* was in a position to invite proposals from various theatres groups that they had trained earlier for plays based on gender discrimination and sexual harassment. The two groups that were ultimately selected for the campaign were *Hayat e Nau (HN)* and a Hyderabad based *Murk Theatre*, whose members had received training from the Interactive Resource Centre (IRC) in Lahore. (The IRC is a specialised theatre training centre established by M.Waseem who trains participants on Boal's methods of interactive theatre. I will discuss this in detail in the next chapter).

The two plays that emerged in the campaign were showcased in public spaces in prominent and busy market places of Karachi as well as in low-income community areas. For the market place performances, *Aahung* collaborated with city council officers to obtain permission and also ensure security and crowd control assistance. A total of six performances were held in a span of three days in September 2006. Three performances of *Akhir Kyun (But Why?)* were conducted by *HN* in market places and one in a low-income community area. *Murk Theatre's's Kab Tak? (Until When?)* was performed in two low income community areas.

³⁰⁷ *Akhir Kyun (But Why?): Street Theatre for Raising Awareness*, DVD, *Aahung* 2006

³⁰⁸ Brochure for *Akhir Kyun: Street Theatre for Raising Awareness*, *Aahung* 2006

Forthcoming / current theatre campaign 2008

At the time when I interviewed Gill, he was about to embark on a 5 day theatre campaign for which six partner organisations (CBOs) had been invited to participate and asked to facilitate the event in which a play would be taken to 10 different areas of rural Sindh, some as far and remote as villages touching the border with India. Here the initiative to conduct such a programme came from the availability of funds, which according to Gill would be better utilised in a campaign such as this one, compared to “using the money to hold a seminar in a five star hotel, organising lunches and listening to praises about each other”³⁰⁹. The underlying problem of short-term engagement with communities is evident in such an effort. Visiting ten places in five days and holding a theatre performance in each venue speaks little of the continuity that such an initiative might hold, especially if *Aahung* has no intention to continue theatre campaigns in its next three year proposal. For this campaign, *HN* had been selected to perform the same play that they had developed and performed for the 2006 theatre campaign conducted in public spaces.

Play content

I now present excerpts of the plays from each of the three theatre campaigns mentioned above with a view to explain that the scripts are linear in their content and clearly adhere to the themes of sexual discrimination and sexual harassment prescribed by *Aahung*. The play scripts are not available for detailed analysis and I include the excerpts from *Aahung*’s own video documentation of the campaigns. *Aahung* does not keep a record of the scripts and this documentation is part of their report and evaluation made for the donors.

Play excerpt from the campaign Breaking Walls 2003³¹⁰

Jindo Dero, Shikarpur District. Language: Urdu (with English subtitles in the dvd)

I transcribe the script from the DVD of the project and include the cuts that are part of this documentation.

³⁰⁹ Interview Shehneel Gill, *ibid*

³¹⁰ *Breaking Walls, A Case Study on the use of Theatre for Development to promote Sexual Rights in Pakistan*, DVD, *Aahung*, 2004

One male actor dressed as a woman with his face partially covered stands on a stage, holding a book. The father in law approaches.

Father in law: My wife works all day and this girl is reading a book! Throw this book away.

He snatches the book and throws it. Enter his Son.

Son: Salaam Alaikum Baba!

Father in law: Walaikum Salam

CUT

Son: (to wife) Why aren't you working? Mother's hand got burnt while cooking. Don't talk back at me!

He hits his wife.

Father in law: Son, take your wife for a medical check up. Go on.

Exit Son with wife who is pushed aggressively off stage.

Father in Law: What a damned woman my son has married. It's been two years and still no child is born.

Son re enters

Son: Dr Habib said, "Your wife is fine. You should get yourself examined"

Father in law: Why should you get examined? You are fine. That's why I say this woman is possessed by evil spirits.

Son: Yes, she has been having fits for the last few days.

The documentation indicates that the son takes his wife to a fake spiritual healer, and begs for his help. The healer condemns the woman as possessed, but once the couple leave, admits that the woman is fine and that he must say such things to earn his living. ³¹¹

Play excerpt from the campaign *Wohh Subha Tou Aaye Gi* (The Morning Will Emerge) 2004³¹²

Language: Urdu (with English subtitles in the dvd)

8 men are seen on the performance area. Two stand slightly apart from the rest and represent the bride's family. Of the remaining, all but one represents the groom. The groom sits on the floor with the Maulvi or religious cleric. They are all engaged in preparing the marriage contract, or the Nikahnama³¹³, before the wedding.

Maulvi: Is the groom's brother here? Who is he? Is it you?

Brother: Yes Yes, I am.

Maulvi: Any conditions for this marriage?

Bride's Father: Yes Maulvi Sahib. We have one condition that our daughter should have the freedom to come to our house after marriage.

³¹¹ *Breaking Walls*, DVD *Aahung* 2004

³¹² *Wohh Subh Tou Aaye Gee*, DVD, *Aahung*, 2006

³¹³ The *Nikahnama* is the centerpiece of the *Muslim Family Law Ordinance* of 1961. By requiring the registration of a marriage contract the MFLO attempted to make marital practices more transparent and accountable to the law. Although the *Nikahnama* contains unprecedented protections for women, few of these provisions are actually enforced. The barriers to enforcement include both a lack of awareness of the existence of such laws and customary practices that actively restrict access to the provisions of the *Nikahnama*. <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/PAKISTANEXTN/Resources/293051-1146639350561/ExecutiveSummary.pdf> accessed 30 August 2008

- Maulvi: (to groom's family) Do you hear?
- Groom's brother: No we won't allow her that. They have taken money from us, money! They have not given her to us for free that we will allow her to go home as she pleases.
- Maulvi: But young man, she will go to her father's house after all!
- Groom's brother: Yes well, she can go once in a year.
- Maulvi: (Writes in the contract and reads aloud) The bride – will go – to her father's house – once a year.
Now. What about the Haq Meher?³¹⁴
- Groom: A full Rs. 5000/-
- Maulvi: (Notes this) Prompt amount?
- Groom: Rs. 3000/-
- Maulvi: And the right to divorce.....
- Brides brother: Hold your tongue Maulvi Sahib!
- Bride's Father: What are you saying Maulvi Sahib? They're not even married yet and you speak of divorce?

³¹⁴ The *Haq Meher* is a severance clause whereby the husband agrees to pay a pre-specified cash amount to the wife in the event that he initiates divorce. Nominally, *Haq Meher* appears to be quite important but in the vast majority of cases, the amounts are far too small to actually provide any viable economic protection to women. <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/PAKISTANEXTN/Resources/293051-1146639350561/ExecutiveSummary.pdf> accessed 30 August 2008

Maulvi: It's written here. I'm merely talking about the law!

Bride's father: I don't believe in such laws of the *Nikahnama*. Rule a line through this section and cancel it!

From the same play – some time has elapsed after the wedding. The bride is sweeping the floor. Her husband's brother approaches her and touches her.

Bride: *(Gets up abruptly)* What are you doing?

Brother in law: Come inside with me. I have some work with you.

Bride: What kind of disrespect is this?

Brother in law: Come inside with me. I have some work with you.

Bride: What work? Tell me here.

Brother in law: No, not here. People will listen. Just come inside and I will tell you.

Bride: What is it that you can't say here?

Brother in law: If you just come inside...

Bride: I'm going to complain to your brother.

Brother in law: How does my brother feature in this conversation?

Bride: Is this the way to address your sister in law?

Brother in law: It's just a little bit of work. Just come inside with me.
(He reaches out to touch her)

Bride: Let me go. *(She slaps him)*

Enter Groom

Groom: What is it? What's going on here?

Brother in law: Look brother. She was teasing me. When I told her to stop, she slapped me.

Groom: Rani? What is this I hear?

Bride: He is lying. He tried to tease me.

Brother in law: Ask her if she slapped me or not.

Groom: So you are accusing my brother?

Bride: No I'm not accusing him. Try to understand what I'm saying.

Groom: You want to create a rift between us brothers. This is what you want, isn't it?

(He hits her. She falls to the floor. He leaves with his brother. The bride is left weeping on the floor).

Play excerpts from the campaign *Akhir Kyun: Street Theatre for Raising Awareness 2006* Karachi.³¹⁵

Bohri Bazaar Marketplace, Karachi

Language: Urdu with English subtitles on DVD. (Some translation my own)

Narrative for the play *Akhir Kyun? Hayat e Nau* Theatre Group, Hyderabad

Since this documentation is more comprehensive and focuses to a large extent on the performances, I am able to extract more information and conduct a detailed analysis of the plays.

The story revolves around a middle class family comprising of a mother and father and their children, a boy and girl of school going age. The mother is seen as more supportive of the girl in decisions regarding her life, even though she is unable to implement any of them in the face of her husband's and son's negative attitudes. She is also seen as someone who is indoctrinated in the system of discrimination against girls, albeit unknowingly, when she serves a lesser portion of leftovers to her daughter for breakfast as against a freshly cooked meal for her son and husband. The wife asks her husband to financially support their daughter for extra tuition classes, which he refuses despite doling out an extravagant amount to the son for a school picnic. The mother decides to work from home and pay for the daughter's tuition fee by stitching clothes. When the daughter asks her brother to escort her to the tuition centre he agrees reluctantly to do so on the way out to a cricket match but tells her to find her own way home. On the way back, the unescorted girl encounters two eve teasers, one of whom is an old man and an acquaintance of her father. She challenges their verbal attacks but comes back home visibly upset. Her mother senses her discomfort and upon finding out what happened promises to engage a rickshaw for her on a monthly basis so she can commute safely. The girl's troubles do not end here and a love letter one of the eve teasers writes to her is intercepted by her brother. He is enraged and incites his father to support him in blaming the girl for inviting the letter. He uses the letter as a reason for her not to go to school or tuitions. The father takes a step ahead in the matter and decides that she must marry the old acquaintance

³¹⁵ *Akhir Kyun (But Why?): Street Theatre for Raising Awareness, DVD, Aahung 2006*

who is single. The girl is given a beating by the brother for her protests and the mother's pleas go unheard. The girl is married off to the old man. Six months later, the girl is seen doing the house chores and mistreated by her husband despite him not providing any finances to run the household. An argument results in him beating her and the play ends as she sits on the floor and weeps. The actors come forth one by one and question why a girl is discriminated against in our society. The play is introduced in a preamble by two actors playing the Master and the Baccha Jamhoora (evidently a popular technique in these plays). I present a few excerpts to get an idea of the dialogue.

Excerpts of play Akhir Kyun?

Preamble – The Master and Baccha Jamhoora

The Master, a man with a drum, enters the performance space indicated by a mat. A man sits on the mat, covered by a large sheet of cloth.

Drum beat and clapping.

Master: Listen, listen respected people. What does the performer say? Listen to the performer carefully. And then go spread the word.

Bachha Jamhoora! Bachha Jamhoora! BACHA JAMHOORA!

The seated figure emerges from under the sheet and stands up.

Baccha Jamhoora: Yes Master!

Master: Baccha Jamhoora!

Baccha Jamhoora: Yes Master!

Master: Sway a little. (*Baccha Jamhoora sways*)

Master: Spin a little. (*Baccha Jamhoora spins*)

Master: Baccha Jamhoora!

Baccha Jamhoora: Yes Master!

Master: Will you tell me something?

Baccha Jamhoora: I will Master!

Master: Where have we arrived today?

Baccha Jamhoora: Master, we are in Karachi.

Master: In Karachi?

Baccha Jamhoora: Yes Master.

Master: What is this crowd?

Baccha Jamhoora: Master, the *Hayat e Nau* team has come from Hyderabad.

Master: The *Hayat e Nau* team has arrived?

Baccha Jamhoora: Yes Master.

Master: What are they up to?

Baccha Jamhoora: You tell us Master.

Master: Should I? (*Drum roll*) Then hear this!! They will perform a story! It's called *Akhir Kyun*! Have you ever seen or heard such a story before?

Baccha Jamhoora: I haven't seen it either Master. Nor heard it!

Master: So watch this story with attention and listen carefully.

Baccha Jamhoora: Yes Master. I understand everything.

Master: Have you understood everything?

Baccha Jamhoora: Yes Master!

Master: So come. Let's all watch the play...

Both: AKHIR KYUN!

Excerpt 2: The play begins, as the family gets ready for the day.

Husband: Do you hear me? Get me my breakfast!

Wife: Yes, in a moment.
Sakina! (*The daughter's name*)

Sakina: Yes Mother!

Wife: Come here child. Take this breakfast to your father.

Sakina: Yes Mother. Here you are Father.
Mother, can I get my breakfast too? I'm getting late.

Wife: Yes Child. In a moment.

Sakina: Mother, do hurry. I'm running late.

Wife: Yes, yes Child.

Son: Mother, hurry please. I'm getting late for school. Can I get my breakfast?

Wife: Here Sakina, take this breakfast to your brother.

Sakina: What's this Mother? I asked for it first!

Wife: Yes, yes.

Son: (to Sakina) Don't you know I'm getting late for school? My teacher makes me stand in the sun if I am late.

Sakina: Well she punishes me too!

Son: Bah! "Punishes me too".

Wife: Stop fighting you two!

(Sakina lingers waiting for her breakfast as father and son eat).

Wife: Here you go Sakina. Here's your breakfast.

Sakina: Mother, what's this! Eggs for my brother and yesterday's leftover lentils for me?

Husband: Be quiet and eat! This is all there is!
Bah! "Eggs for brother and lentils for me".

Son: Dad. I need Rs 500/- for a school picnic today.

Husband: You need Rs 500? *(Takes out the money form his wallet)*.
You do harass me my boy. Here. Take this.

Son: Thanks Dad. Mum, I'm off.

Wife: Finish your breakfast at least my son.

Husband: Grab a bite to eat on the way son!

Son: Yes Dad!

Sakina: I'm off Mother.

Husband: Clear the dishes first!

Sakina: *(timidly)* Mother!

Wife: You go along. I'll clear the dishes.

Excerpt 3: Sakina is harassed by eve teasers on her way home.

Eve teaser 1: Praise be to Allah! Going alone? Shall I escort you home?
At least listen to me!
(Sakina passes by across him and leaves the performance space)
Ah never mind. She'll take this route again. I'll catch her later.
It's late. She hasn't returned yet. *(sings two lines of a love song)*
Sakina passes by again
Ah Praise be to Allah! You are here!

Sakina: Why do you keep bothering me everyday? Don't you have a mother or sisters at home?

1: Sure I do. But I don't have a lover!

Sakina: Stupid man!

1: Hey! Here! Listen...

(Eve teaser 2, the old man, confronts Sakina)

2: *(Sings)* I am still youthful)

Sakina: Have you no shame Old Man? Look at your age, and your behaviour!

2: What does age matter when the heart is young?

Sakina: I could be as old as your daughter.

2: Could be. But you're not my daughter!

Sakina: Forget the young, even the old are fired up.

The play *Kab Tak? (Until When?)* Murk Theatre's Group, Hyderabad

Area Korangi 3.5, Karachi

Language: Urdu, with English subtitles on DVD. Some translations my own.

Narrative – *Kab Tak? Murk Theatre's* Hyderabad

The cast comprises of 4 men and two women. We understand from initial narrations by the two women that they will present their stories. A family celebrating the birth of a child starts the play.

Celebrations turn sour when the men find out that the child is a girl. We now see the girl, Sakina, as a 15 or 16 year old, keen to continue her studies and do her Matriculation (grade 10 secondary school exams). She is scoffed at by her brother, paternal uncle, father and mother. She is berated for aspiring to study more than her brother who has failed exams for grade 8. She stays at home, but even then, as shown in separate scenes, is not allowed to visit her neighbour, or to read her book. She is reprimanded for combing her hair and putting on some make up even though she is staying at home. The second story emerges after this and the protagonist Zaibu tells the audience that compared to Sakina, she was allowed to study and work. However she is harassed in the streets on her way to work, as well as in the workplace. In both instances she is blamed for inviting the offences. She is finally fired from her job by her boss (who is a woman) upon the complaint of a customer who is displeased at Zaibu for rejecting his advances. He blames her for being inattentive and incompetent salesperson and Zaibu returns home distraught. At home her brother brings back news that Zaibu was seen talking to men in the streets, even though this was the instance when she was being harassed by them. The father is enraged and decides to marry Zaibu off to a drug addict. Her mother's pleas go unnoticed and she is told by the father that young men have their ways and settle down after marriage. The play ends with questions posed by both women about how long they must suffer the injustices of the society.

Excerpt of play *Kab Tak?*

Sakina wants to study.

Sakina stands in the centre as the remaining cast circles her and chants:

Chant: Princess Daughter, Princess Daughter. What do you wish for? What do you wish for? Princess Daughter, Princess Daughter. What do you wish for? What do you wish for?

The girl screams and the cast disperses. Three men and one woman position themselves in four corners to construct a square. In clockwise order, she approaches her brother, her paternal

uncle, her father and her mother who all turn away from her in a huff. She approaches her mother. Each actor speaks from his / her designated corner with Sakina in the centre.

Sakina: Mother. I want to study. I want to do my Matric.

Mother: Matric? Even your brother hasn't done his Matric. It's not as if you will become a doctor. What will you do with all this education? You will end up doing housework in any case.

Sakina: But Mother. Brother failed his grade 8 exams. And I've got such good results!

Brother: What will my friends say? People will taunt me that my sister is more educated than I am!

Sakina: How is it my fault if your friends are wayward? Where's the harm in doing Matric?

Uncle: There was harm enough doing middle school child! Brother, I warned you before. What's the use of educating girls? Now look. She's got a taste for it. Its studies today, and tomorrow it will be....

Sakina: Uncle! At least it's a taste for something good. You always twist the meaning of my words.

Father: You can't understand the meaning of things the way we do. Enough! No more arguments! You cannot continue your studies!

Excerpt 2: Restrictions are imposed on Sakina

4 actors take positions at four corners of a square. Sakina stands in the centre. She moves to the left and is walking out of the space between actors 1 and 2 (brother and uncle) when they stop her and make her go back into the square.

Brother and Uncle: Where are you going?

Sakina: Outside.

Brother and Uncle: Girls don't go outside! Go inside.

Sakina moves right and tries to walk through the space between actors 3 and 4 (father and mother) when she is stopped by them.

Father and mother: Where are you going?

Sakina: Inside.

Father and mother: Girls do not go inside.

Sakina returns to the centre and sits. All four actors address her from their corners.

All: What are you doing?

Sakina: Sitting down.

All: Girls do not sit! (*She stands*)

All: What are you doing?

Sakina: Standing.

All: Girls do not stand.
Sit down! *(She sits)*

All: Stand up! *(She stands)*
Sit Down! *(She sits)*
Stand up! *(She stands)*
Sit Down! *(She sits)*

Excerpt 3: objections on Sakina's behaviour

4 actors in four corners of the square look at Sakina as she combs her hair. Each speaks from his / her corner.

Brother: Ah! Oil!

Father: Eyeliner!

Uncle: Comb!

Mother: Mirror!

Sakina: I had some free time, so I thought....

Brother: You thought.." why don't I oil my hair a little".

Father: "Put on a little eyeliner!"

Uncle: "Comb my hair a little!"

Mother: "Look in the mirror a bit!"

- Sakina: But I'm sitting at home. Not going out anywhere!
- Brother: And what if someone comes to the house?
- Uncle: What if your future in-laws find out?
- Father: It's a matter of principle. Girls from respectable homes do not dress up!
- Mother: They do the housework!
- Uncle: That's right. And here you are, all dressed up! Who is going to do the housework?
- All: Repent! Repent! Repent!
Uff! Uff! Uff!
Shame! Shame! Shame!

Excerpt 4: Zaibun's story - Zaibun is harassed in the workplace

Zaibun is attending to work in a section of the shop. A man enters notices her. He approaches her.

- Man: Salam Alaikum
- Zaibun: Waliakum Assalam
- Man: Seems like you are new here.
- Zaibun: Um.. er.. y-y-yes
- Man: Praise be to Allah! Very beautiful!
- Zaibun: I beg your pardon?

Man: That vase. That vase is very beautiful. Can you pick it up?

Zaibun hands him the vase. He leers at her.

Man: How much will you charge?

Zaibun: What!!

Man: For the vase! How much does this vase cost? The – price!

Zaibun: 500 rupees.

Man: It's nice. Very nice. Here. Put it back. Can you show me that photo album?

Zaibun: This one?

Man: No. The one above that.

Zaibun: That one?

Man: No. Higher.

Zaibun reaches out to the album as the man attempts to leer at her body. She turns to hand him the album, and he attempts to grab her.

Zaibun: *(loudly)* What are you doing??

Shop Owner enters on hearing the commotion.

Shop Owner: What's happening here?

Zaibun Madam... look....

Man: Madam. What sort of girls have you hired in your shop? They know nothing about modern etiquettes nor do they know how to deal with a customer.

Zaibun: Madam I was just....

Shop Owner: Enough! Can you ever do anything properly?

Man: Now look here Madam. I didn't come here to be insulted. Good day!

Shop Owner: Sir.. sir, please stop .. Sir!

(He leaves the shop)

Shop Owner: Now look what you have done! He is such a regular customer of ours. You've upset him!

Zaibun: But Madam. I didn't do anything!

Shop Owner: Where is your mind woman? Now go and look after the crockery section. You're incapable of handling this one.

Stylistic concerns in the plays presented in *Aahung's* campaigns

In the three campaigns discussed above, the aesthetic sensibility and awareness of the theatrical form is rudimentary, although there is a more conscious effort towards it in the later productions of *Akhir Kyun* and *Kab Tak*. This gradual progression in the presentation

techniques can be attributed to many reasons. The first campaign *Breaking Walls* was conducted in a conservative community where staging a production in a conservative community and incorporating its members in it was probably enough of an achievement for *Aahung*. Here, as I will elaborate in the following discussion, there is little attention to the form of the play or its presentation. A slight improvement follows in the second campaign *Wohh Subha Tou Aaeye Gi* (The Morning Will Emerge), because of Aahung's decision to appoint a trainer for the actors. And finally the third campaign that showcases plays by *Hayat e Nau* and *Murk Theatre* receives the most importance because of the groups' previous training background with *Ajoka*, *Tehrik e Niswan* and the IRC. Presentations here appear more thought through in terms of form, movement, and costumes.

While the presentations of most plays in these three campaigns remains basic, the gradual increase in the aesthetic sensibility and theatrical form towards the later productions may be attributed to a conscious effort on *Aahung's* part to train the performers through theatre workshops and also to invite theatre groups who although may not have trained with them before, have had some training in their careers in the past. This is significantly evident in the manner in which the plays are presented. Again it is important to reiterate that I am making this analysis through what I have seen on the DVD documentation.

In the first campaign, *Breaking Walls*, the CBO VWDO was trained in a basic theatre workshop by Shehneel Gill, *Aahung's* own Outreach Coordinator. His knowledge of theatre was based from some training with *Raasti* as well as by seeing plays by *Tehrik e Niswan* in community forums. The community to which the first campaign was taken to in Shikarpur district was very conservative and it was unheard of to have a woman participate in the performance. Hence a man, who draped a colourful *dupatta* or scarf around him, partially covering his face to disguise his appearance, performed the woman's role. The stage was built for a multitude of activities that were part of the day's programme. Banners representing the sponsors and welcoming the audience took up the back wall of the stage and remained the backdrop for the play. Apart from the colourful red *dupatta*, no other conscious effort was made towards costumes. The spiritual healer wore a white beard, but everyone else was dressed in his

everyday clothes. The audience comprised of men and women, and children in abundance. The children were seated on the floor, while the men and women on chairs. The seating was on the same level. There was also a partition in the audience between the men and women. The organisers had arranged microphones for the play and actors stood in front of these for their lines. Since the plays were performed in the later part of the day, the stage was flood lit by spotlights. Interestingly, the electricity went off during the performance, and the remaining part of the play was performed in the light of lanterns. The play relied entirely on dialogue, as the form did not incorporate anything but standing in front of the microphone and speaking the lines. It would be unfair to say that the play was bereft of any hard work. These were first time actors, and managed their lines with some degree of emotion.

The play from the second campaign *Wohh Subha Tou Aaeye Gi* (The Morning Will Emerge) emerged after a ten-day workshop with *Tehrik e Niswan* member Mehmood Bhatti. It was very evident in the documentation that the members of the five CBOs inducted into the workshop were highly self-conscious and shy to interact with each other. Partially one aim of the workshop was to break their inhibitions so that they could take plays to a community. The women spoke of feeling awkward about themselves and their bodies before the workshop and more confident afterwards. The play was performed in what seemed like an open space or large courtyard in a low-income community area. The audience was seated on the floor and some people were visible watching the play from the balconies of the surrounding houses and buildings. The performance space was identified by placing a few rugs on the floor. No props were visible and all actions were mimed. Given that the plays were supervised by Bhatti, some attention was given to the form of the play. Simple devices such as the formation of a line by actors not participating in a scene behind the action helped to lend the play some structure. Actors seated in this line behind the enacted scene but facing the action, entered the action when needed and returned to the line when finished. Some inconsistent attention was given to costumes and some men wore a plain white *kurta shalwar* (long shirt and loose trousers, everyday wear), while some wore trousers and black T- shirts with “Body Mind Spirit” printed in red on them. New to the experience, the actors were not entirely comfortable in their roles, and often avoided eye contact with each other.

The third campaign presented two plays from relatively more trained theatre groups. *Hayat e Nau* presenting *Akhir Kyun?* emerged from the theatre training conducted by Bhatti and *Murk Theatre's* was already an established theatre group from Hyderabad with a considerable amount of training under its belt. *Akhir Kyun?* was prepared by *HN* when *Aahung* invited proposals for plays from numerous theatre groups that it has encountered or helped create in its last two ventures. I had some insight into the situation when I spoke to Bhatti about *HN's* play *Akhir Kyun?* According to Bhatti, he had conducted theatre training for *HN* at their request some time before the invitation of proposals, and the workshop had resulted in a rough framework of this play. When their work was accepted to be included in *Aahung's* campaign *HN* once again asked Bhatti to fine-tune their play.³¹⁶ Knowledge of this was denied by Gill who maintained it was to *Aahung's* credit that *HN* was created and that their play was fine-tuned by feedback from the *Aahung* team³¹⁷. Either way, there is some of Bhatti's influence in their work, which is in turn a culmination of years of training with *Tehrik e Niswan*.

The cast of *Akhir Kyun?* comprises of four male and two female actors. Four actors remain persistent in their roles of the family whereas the remaining two men play double roles of the Master / Eve teaser 1 and Baccha Jamhoora / Old eve teaser 2. The element of some folk tradition is present in the form of drums, clapping and songs. The same element also allows for the inclusion of the street performer duo of the Master and Bachha Jamhoora, whose roles I have discussed in *Raasti's* plays earlier in this chapter. The performance space is marked out by a mat on the floor and no other props are used in the play. The only musical instrument used is a drum by the actor who also plays the Master and employs the drum in a song sung during the play. Since the performance is in a market place, the actors are provided with collar microphones for sound projection. The play begins with a drumbeat that aims to capture the crowd's attention and is supported by strong clapping from the cast. The Drummer is the first to enter the performance space. Much like the previously described play, the remaining actors remain standing in a line behind the mat as a chorus. They walk into their roles from their places in the line, and return to the line once their part is over. Bachha Jamhoora sits on the mat covered by a sheet and springs up when the master shouts his name for the third time.

³¹⁶ Interview by phone, Mehmood Bhatti, member *Tehrik e Niswan*, 29 August 2008

³¹⁷ Interview by phone, Shehneel Gill, *Aahung*, 29 August 2008

Following their preamble the play begins with the breakfast scene. While no props are used, the cast employs action with sound to indicate activities like cooking bread, cleaning rice grains and sweeping the floor effectively. The chorus line is also used to indicate scene changes or time lapses. In the episode when Sakina is returning from the tuition centre, the actor uses the chorus line as a human curtain to emerge from behind it on one side and then the other to suggest two encounters with eve teasers and some time lapse between the two episodes. The same device is used again when Sakina is married to the old man. The actors playing Sakina and her husband emerge from behind one end of the chorus line, walk across the performing space, go behind it from the other end and take their places in the chorus line to suggest the marriage ceremony and the journey of the girl from her house to her husband's. At this moment the play suggests a time lapse of six months with a new device when an actor uses a placard with the words "Six months later", which he also displays and announces to the audience. This device is isolated and not repeated again in the play. The actors employ the use of a song at the moment when Sakina is brutally beaten by her brother and her father seals her fate with the decision of her marriage. The song is misplaced and sung poorly, unable to evoke the emotion it was meant to. There is no attention to the costumes in this play, and all the actors are dressed in casual everyday clothes. The men wear trousers and shirts, the women a *kurta shalwar* and *dupatta* that covers their heads. While these actors are better trained than the ones discussed earlier, there is again clear evidence of a lack of focus and shifting of eye contact. Nevertheless, the play emerges as more thought out in its form and narrative compared to the ones discussed before. The actors are young and energetic and this is one reason why *Aahung* continues its partnership with the group. The reason why they gave more precedence to their play compared to *Murk Theatre's* in this campaign was also because *HN* used more song, dance and lent their play some element of entertainment.³¹⁸

The other play in the third campaign was *Murk Theatre's Kab Tak? (Until When)*. *Murk Theatre* was established in 1995 in Hyderabad and has conducted plays on social and political issues since then. It has received about twenty theatre trainings through workshops conducted by the Interactive Resource Centre Lahore (IRC), *Tehrik e Niswan*, *Ajoka Theatre* and *Lok*

³¹⁸ Interview, Gill, *ibid*

Rehas Theatre in Lahore.³¹⁹ Given that these are some of the most established organisations in the field, *Murk* has some solid training to show in its portfolio.

Compared to the plays discussed above, *Kab Tak?* employs theatrical devices and forms that are more sophisticated than those used by previously discussed performers. However, there is a sharp distinction in approach between the formal language employed in Sakina's and Zaibu's stories. While the first uses more abstract devices like formations and movements to suggest the harassment of women, as well interesting compositions to support the narrative, the second story runs in a more linear fashion. Upon investigating I found that the first part of the story was devised earlier in workshops with *Ajoka*, and incorporated in this play later. *Murk Theatre's* founder Dr Asif confirmed my thoughts when I suggested that the initial section (*Daughter Princess, what do you wish for...*) was in fact an extract from one of *Ajoka's* plays and was devised by *Murk* in a workshop with *Ajoka*.³²⁰

The visual form of the play is lent harmony and continuity by the fact that all the actors, (5 male and 2 female) wear a white *kurta shalwar*. The women wear the traditional Sindhi Ajrak (ancient block printed patterned scarf). The performance area is demarked by rugs on the floor. The actors themselves mark out an invisible square in the first story and the actor playing Sakina moves to all four corners as she speaks to each actor in the scene when she expresses her wish to study further. This format is consistent in the play through Sakina's story that appears more thought out compared to the next one. The play begins with interesting silent movements in which a pair of men approach one woman in a threatening manner and the only sound that accompanies this movement is a muffled scream of the woman being pursued. Emerging from the back of the performance space this formation ends in a freeze at the front of the performance space and is followed by a variation of the same by another pair of men and a woman enacting the same. Both freezes, strong formations that depict oppression hold the performance space in silence for a few moments before the entire cast forms one collective freeze to suggest the same. The story of Sakina begins when the actor emerges from this last freeze and addresses the audience to start her narrative. The second story relies more on

³¹⁹ Interview by phone, Dr Asif Memon, Founder *Murk Theatre*, Hyderabad, 31 August 2008

³²⁰ Interview Dr Asif, *ibid*

dialogue in communicating Zaibu's woes and none of the previous devices are repeated to lend the play a continuity of form. The play also incorporates song without instruments, using popular folk songs that depict sorrow and are sung by one actor in a strong and resounding voice. The actors also line up at the back of a performance space when they are not a scene, but compared to previously discussed groups, *Murk's* actors do not face the performance area and despite being visible, remain cut off from the performance and audience when they are not acting. These more sophisticated devices are representative of *Murk's* training at the hands of stronger groups but they seem to have been a detriment as far as *Aahung's* project was concerned. In this campaign, they were allotted only two performances compared to *HN's* four, and their use of more abstract language was received by *Aahung* as being far too sophisticated for the community. Gill's comments on the play being too philosophical in its approach and too advanced for the community reflect *Aahung's* point of view that a more complicated theatrical form was not feasible for communicating a message.³²¹

Audience reception

In all the campaigns documented, a session inviting feedback from the audience follows each play. The audience comprised of men and women both except in *HN's* play in the market place where no women stood around the performance to watch the play. *Aahung's* motivation to conduct this session is to pose questions that would help in sensitising an audience as well as to assess the degree of sensitisation achieved by the audience after watching the play. Questions that *Aahung's* team aimed to raise were basic and those that invited interpretations from the narrative. What was happening in the play, who was right in his / her action, which character did you relate to, how is this play related to our own attitudes, what are the causes for oppressive attitudes in society, are some of the questions *Aahung* aims to pose in such a question-answer session. Gill states that instead of taking larger issues that are more in the forefront to the communities, such as honour killing, *Aahung* finds it essential to tackle the root cause of the problem and question the very beginnings of gender discrimination at home. Given that these issues are difficult to confront in conservative communities, theatre allows for the discussion to remain pertinent to the narrative without actually accusing anyone in the

³²¹ Interview, Shehneel Gill, *ibid*, 13 August 2008

community. This is why the audience is more receptive towards these ideas and agrees largely with the fact that these issues are important enough to be addressed.³²² The same sentiments are expressed by VDWO member and actor Abdul Ghani, “If we tell people [...] look what’s happening in your house, they will get angry. We tell them through theatre what is wrong and [...] right”.³²³ As a result most comments that are received at the end of a play are in support of the victim, acknowledging the injustices of the social structure. I have rarely seen, in my experience as a performer in community plays, negative comments inspired by a play.

“She (the victim) had no purpose of her own. She is viewed as a lifeless object [...] placed wherever they (the men) choose. She has no rights over her husband, parents or in-laws”.

Woman in audience.

“I feel like the father and son were both useless because they didn’t do anything. They took the daughter’s money and enjoyed it while she worked and then they sold her. They sold her because they didn’t want to work. They also took away her right to divorce, so the fault lies entirely with the men”.

Woman in audience.

“What I’ve learnt from this [...] is that instead of criticising others, I need to start from my home, give the wife her rights, the man his rights. If I see my wife as a human being, all rights will automatically become equal”

*Man in audience*³²⁴

This last more perceptive comment comes from Mukhtar Gill, representative of the NGO Caritas International, based in Hyderabad. M.Gill had organised this performance in his constituency in the area of Latifabad Hyderabad and the NGO had also hosted the ten day

³²² Interview Gill, *ibid*, 13 August 2008

³²³ Abdul Ghani, VDWO member, *Breaking Walls, A Case Study on the use of Theatre for Development to promote Sexual Rights in Pakistan*, DVD, Aahung, 2004

³²⁴ *Breaking Walls, A Case Study on the use of Theatre for Development to promote Sexual Rights in Pakistan*, DVD, Aahung, 2004

theatre workshop.³²⁵ Naturally these comments are expected from someone who is more sensitised to the issues at hand, but his comments also reflect a sharp contrast compared to the analysis lent by the community.

From the campaign *Wohh Subha Tou Aaye Gee* (The Morning Will Emerge), in which two plays were shown, a selection of comments included in the DVD represent a range of expressions from analysis of the narrative to agreement that the injustices portrayed are a true depiction of society. Interestingly, some male points of view are weighed down heavily by their indoctrination of the view that males are superior to women and the sub text in their comments can be read as their sense of ownership of women in the social set up, almost touching upon issues related to honour. I include examples of these in the passage below along with a couple of very contentious statements made by young men, as well as some extraordinarily bizarre solutions. Most views expressed below are those of men, except where otherwise mentioned. Some points of view are very narrative in character, mostly in the portrayal of injustices in society. There is an element of a lack of ownership to the problem whereby one commentator blames the government, the police as well as the elders of the society for not stopping incidents of harassment. Conversely to this, some people claim responsibility for discrimination against women and say that the problem should be corrected from their homes and their own attitudes. One policeman on duty during the performance added that daughters were more deserving of love and attention at home because ultimately they were the supporters of their parents in their old age, as boys abandoned their parents after they got married. One man brought this into a religious perspective saying that young men who harassed women on the streets should know that this is an act against the principles of Islam. Women are largely supportive of the victims of harassment discrimination, saying that women discriminated at home do not develop self confidence and allow themselves to be ill treated by their in laws as they are brought up with this attitude. Acknowledging the fact that even though young women are often more talented and deserving of a better education compared to their male siblings, they are denied opportunities because of the discriminatory attitudes in the home. More male orientated points of view come out in expressions such as “ As a brother, I would say that instead of marrying

³²⁵ Interview by phone, Mehmood Bhatti, 01 Sept 2008

girls to such husbands, it is better to keep them at home, shower them with love and provide for them. No brother would tolerate a stranger hitting his sister". (My emphasis). Others depicting a similar viewpoint include, "Men should think that if their own sisters are treated in this way, how would they feel?" and "We should permit our mothers and sisters to study".

The more problematic ones that offer solutions to men's' advantage are:

"I would like to give this message to women, that they should not leave their homes unescorted. You should be escorted by a younger brother, father, or even your mother. The family should give more precedence to this than to domestic chores and escort the girls. This will reduce the harassment"

"Co educational schools should not be allowed. Boys, they are mischievous by nature. But the girls are affected adversely. They also join in the mischief. If the boys are swearing, they do it too. Nowadays girls are found in restaurants and at the sea side rather than in college"

"Sometimes it is the girl's fault. They respond to the teasing and encourage the boys. Girls should be strict in their response".

And finally some overly ambitious solutions:

"This is a brilliant play. It depicts exactly what is happening in our society. If you continue to show it, the society will be cured absolutely". (woman)

"There should be a team responsible for stopping this so that our country can advance"³²⁶

Aahung's response to the theatre campaigns

Aahung's comments regarding the ten day workshop for *Wohh Subha Tou Aaye Gee* (The Morning Will Emerge) are singularly positive in the DVD documentation. With reference to the theatre workshop, Shehneel Gill asserts that theatre is an effective tool for removing the differences between age and between the educated and uneducated people. He felt that this

³²⁶ *Aakhir Kyun (But Why?): Street Theatre for Raising Awareness*, DVD, *Aahung* 2006

was a process that they must take forward because of its efficacy. Fatima Haider, the then Programme Manager for this project referred to theatre as a means to draw people out of their homes and talk about issues, allowing them to challenge their thoughts and norms. She found the audience response to the plays overwhelming. “Even the men present at the plays started to cry and everyone got so involved that wherever you looked people were crying, as though their own stories had just been told”.³²⁷ Made as documentation for themselves as well as evaluation reports for their donors, comments supporting the project are only to be expected. Two years later, as Acting Director of *Aahung*, her comments are more reflective about the impact of theatre in *Aahung*’s work. While she acknowledges that the question answer sessions after a play are the only form of evidence through which they can assess the impact of a performance, it is very clear across the board that people start recognising the fact that there is an issue to be addressed. However she does not foresee a long-term role of theatre in *Aahung*’s work. The reasons she points towards are varied, one largely being that only a small portion of their budget is dedicated to awareness raising and theatre campaigns or projects are conceived if funds are in excess. Another reason for *Aahung*’s lack of will to continue theatre activities in their development work is that they find that theatre is not proving to have the impact that they want to see in a community. While this is a difficult task, Haider noticed from some anecdotal evidence that despite taking serious issues to the community in these plays the audience responds to these by laughing at issues depicted in some scenes. This is evident in the DVD documentation in almost all plays recorded when the audience certainly laughs on the occasions when women are beaten up in various situations in the plays. Whether this is a discomfort on the audience’s part as Haider points out, that manifests itself through laughter and jeering, or an inability to respond to the situation, *Aahung* finds such responses disturbing and contrary to their intentions. Maintaining the benefit of doubt in such situations, I questioned whether it was also because the medium was new to a community and the discomfort arose from viewing a live performance. This led to my also raising the issue of *Aahung* taking plays to several communities as one-off events rather than focusing on a single community for a more long-term period to be able to assess the impact on a long-term basis. Haider agreed that taking plays to several communities denied the opportunity to follow up on the impact. “We have never

³²⁷ *Wohh Subh Tou Aaye Gee*, DVD, *Aahung*, 2006

really gone back and touched base with the same people who attended the theatre to find out whether after seeing the performances, any change was made in their lives or not". This in her opinion was problematic because *Aahung* was unable to assess the effects. Conversely if a single community was visited more continuously, the project would yield better results in terms of assessing impact, but this would reduce the number of people reached through such a venture. "Donors pay a lot of emphasis on reaching a maximum number of people" So while the donors would support employing theatre as a tool for development, they may object to the fact that the funds did not yield a maximum number of outreach. The influence of the donors then becomes an essential part of the argument. *Aahung* has three donors³²⁸ who contribute certain percentages to the overall budget. While there is freedom to conduct development work from this pool of resources in any way *Aahung* chooses, it is inevitable that they have some specific agendas. They may in their own capacity insist on emphasis on one issue or the other and *Aahung* makes sure that all these issues are covered in their work through the financial year. These activities are then documented for evaluation reports and sent to all the donors at the end of the project. "While our programme will incorporate all of these aspects [...] we report on all of them to all the donors so that there is some level of satisfaction". Another reason for its lack of continuity in working with the same communities emerges from *Aahung's* own nature as an organisation, one which works with CBOs and their capacity building. Therefore most of their work is need based and encapsulates a variety of organisations that approach them for training. This along with the fact that their lack of human resources and limited capacity do not allow them to retrace communities and evaluate impact make the task more difficult for them.³²⁹

From the above discussion I come to the following conclusions: *Aahung* has used theatre as a practical need-based tool only when funds allow for its inclusion in their work. While theatre has raised issues in communities that have not experienced the form before, it does not have a long-term place in *Aahung's* development work because of its lack of impact and inability to yield quantitative results. These can only be achieved in one off campaigns, in which maximum numbers of people are reached in several communities. This however impedes continuity, a problem that *Aahung* acknowledges.

³²⁸ NOVIB, The Packard Foundation and IWHC, International Women's Health Coalition

³²⁹ Interview, Fatima Haider, *ibid*

***Tehrik e Niswan's* community theatre projects for donor organisations**

It is necessary to include in this discussion two community theatre projects that *Tehrik e Niswan* undertook in 2004 and 2004-6 for donor organisations. Both these were British Council commissioned projects on Forced marriages (2004) and Honour killings (2004-2006). Whether it was a need based venture for *Tehrik e Niswan* that looked at these projects as means to keep the company running through financial resources, or a genuine attempt to continue its practice of politically motivated theatre, I argue that the lack of continuity in both projects became the shortcoming for the group. This new *sponsored* form of community theatre, when taken up by *Tehrik* fell short of its own ideology in its lack of sustenance. It also created very linear issue based plays, as opposed to the plays that the group has created thus far.

As mentioned in previous chapters, *Tehrik e Niswan* has managed to sustain its theatre practices on both urban as well as community levels. In the past, a large part of its practice was aimed towards taking performances to low-income communities and presenting plays on a variety of social issues. Initial performances were politically motivated, voluntary in nature, and shared a spirit of camaraderie with the organisations that shared *Tehrik e Niswan's* political views. Gradually some paid community performances were conducted upon the invitation of NGOs but the frequency of these performances largely depended on such invitations. *Tehrik e Niswan's* last three mobile productions have been devised within the confines of either specific or open ended project briefs originating from three organisations; *Meri Zindagi Ka Safar* (The Journey of My Life) under the Gender Equality Project (GEP)³³⁰ in 2003, *Dhiyan Malein Pardes* (Daughters are Destined to Far-away Lands) for Islamabad-based organisation SACH (Struggle for Change), an organisation that supports victims of forced marriage and domestic violence³³¹ in 2004 and *Akhir Kyun* (Why?) in 2005-6 for The British Council's project on Honour Killing. I use the latter two as case studies for this section. It is important to mention here that I was part of the *Dhiyan* project and also partially participated in *Akhir Kyun?* in urban presentations of the play. It is also necessary to mention that the title of the latter play does not reflect any

³³⁰ The Project was funded by UK's Department for International Development (DFID) and managed by the British Council.

³³¹ Declan Walsh, "The Rescuers", www.guardian.co.uk article dated 9 Dec. 2005, accessed 17 Dec 2005

connection with *Hayat e Nau's* play of the same name. Where necessary for clarity I will address the title as *Tehrik's Akhir Kyun?* to avoid confusion.

Dhiyan Malein Pardes (Daughters are Destined to Far-away Lands) 2004

Project sponsors: SACH

Tehrik e Niswan was introduced to SACH when an annual partners' meeting was conducted by the Gender Equality Project, in which participants shared and reviewed their work done during the year under the GEP umbrella. The GEP project was an open-ended one for *Tehrik e Niswan*, enabling a two year funding for the theatre company that allowed it to devise two mobile plays on subjects of its choice, as well as conduct theatre-training workshops. In a sense such a project had provided *Tehrik e Niswan* with an opportunity to simply carry on its mission of spreading awareness on social issues, without the confines of a commissioned project. It was at this meeting that *Tehrik e Niswan's* recent play on women's health caught the attention of Khalida Salimi, the director of SACH who invited the company in 2004 to devise a play about the problem of forced marriages.³³²

Based in Islamabad, SACH is an organisation that has been providing multi disciplinary services to victims of human rights abuses since 1993; in 2004 the organisation was working actively on the issue of forced marriages in northern areas of Pakistan. Its target communities are based in and around the slums of Islamabad and Rawalpindi and its program includes outreach and awareness-raising on issues around child labour, child sexual abuse and domestic violence.³³³ The organisation's multi disciplinary programme includes health, legal and economic aid and counselling as well as providing shelter homes for women in distress. Salimi explains that organisations that provide direct service delivery have very few financial resources to sustain their activities. Hence the various components of SACH have been set up with the assistance of a host of funding bodies. These organisations include the United Nations Voluntary Fund for Torture Victims (supporting the health component), the United Nations Development Programme (supporting the Access to Justice Programme), the US based

³³² Interview, Sheema Kermani, *Tehrik e Niswan*, Karachi, 16 May 2006

³³³ SACH, www.sachonline.org, accessed 18 May 2006

women's group Global Fund that assists case handling, and the EU which has recently approved a project for working children.

The issue of Forced Marriages

Although SACH has been working on the issue of forced marriages for the last seven years by carrying out rescue operations and offering refuge to victims, it gained the support of the British High Commission in 2003. It is important to understand that the British Council's interest in this issue lay in the fact that the majority of the women living in the areas of Jhelum (Punjab), Noshera (Punjab) and Mirpur (Azad Kashmir), who sought assistance, were dual nationals of Pakistan and the UK. Their British nationality made it an obligation for the British Council to rescue them in times of need and the frequency of calls for assistance drew their attention to this as a matter of urgency. The dual nationality is not a phenomenon particular to the UK and Pakistan. SACH has dealt with similar cases of women who hold dual nationalities of Pakistan and Norway and are settled in the cities of Sialkot and Kharan. The support system created by the two organisations works thus; a team in the Consular section of the British High Commission works in liaison with SACH for specific assistance to women (and sometimes men) in forced marriage situations. SACH claims to have helped build the capacity of the British High Commission to take up this challenge and in the initial stages facilitated rescue operations as well as the filing of legal petitions. However the roles became distributed when SACH being a civil society organisation turned to service delivery and providing protection, whereas the British High Commission, as an official authority used its legal right to rescue and repatriate.³³⁴

Hundreds of young British Pakistani women, caught between cultures and pressured by their families, are trapped into forced marriages each year. Often parents coax the young women to visit Pakistan on a holiday on the pretext of visiting family or attending a wedding. Once there, emotional pressure, and sometimes even violence, is resorted to in order to force the women to agree to marry cousins or men within the community. The Diplomatic rescue squad from the British High Commission in Islamabad sets out twice a week to rescue women from the clutches of their families and put them back safely on a plane to the UK. In 2004 their

³³⁴ Interview, Khalida Salimi, Director SACH, Islamabad, 06 May 2006

team saved around 105 women, most of them ranging between ages 18 and 24.³³⁵ In 2006 a newspaper report states that approximately 250 to 300 rescues were conducted each year, increasing the Foreign Office's caseload by 20 per cent a year. At least 15 per cent of cases involve young British men³³⁶

Motivated by the concerns of its nationals, the British Council sought to resolve the situation through more long-term solutions. Police sensitisation and public awareness campaigns have been part of this system, aiming to raise public awareness of the issue. While the initial years of handling rescue operations were precarious, it was later that, with the support of the police force, SACH and the British Council were able to bring the issue to public awareness. The decision to commission a play on the subject arose when the British High Commission, under the Public Diplomacy Fund, supported SACH and commenced a project titled 'To Initiate a Public Debate on the Issue of Forced Marriage'.³³⁷

Dhiyan Malein Pardes (Daughters are Destined to Far-away Lands)

Narrative

The narrative for *Dhiyan* was developed by *Tehrik e Niswan*'s writer-director Anwer Jafri from several case studies provided by SACH as source material. The play was constructed around the story of a woman who lived in the UK, but was brought to Pakistan on the pretext of attending a cousin's wedding. It is only later that she discovers that the wedding celebrations were in fact her own. While she succumbs to her fate of being married to an illiterate cousin, some years later she somehow finds the strength to support the cause of her sister in law who is now being forced by her family to marry a man several years her senior. The two women escape to take refuge in a shelter where they encounter an educated woman who has also sought refuge from a similar situation. While it is evident that the latter does not share the same social background as the two women she meets, it is very clear that this issue is a concern that is seen across all strata of society. The pressure placed upon the women by their families

³³⁵ Walsh, *ibid*

³³⁶ *Telegraph The*, www.telegraph.co.uk, article dated 03 January 2006, accessed 24 May 2006.

³³⁷ Asma Mundrawala, "Fitting the Bill: commissioned theatre projects on human rights in Pakistan: the work of Karachi based theatre group *Tehrik e Niswan*", *Research in Drama Education*, Vol.12, no.2, Routledge Journals, Taylor and Francis, UK, June 2007, p.153

ranges from violent force to emotional blackmail, and ultimately the play ends on an ambiguous note where the sounds of gunshots and screams in the shelter home leaves the audience wondering who the perpetrators of the crime were and whose family sought out the women to put an end to their lives.³³⁸

Reception and SACH's response

For SACH to embark upon a fairly complex theatre project on the subject, involving a Karachi based company and liaising with it for months while the script developed, it may be considered curious that the play was only performed in four places in the Punjab and Kashmir, one of which was a show casing of the play for sponsors and supporters in Islamabad. Of the remaining three performances in Jhelum, Gujjar Khan and Mirpur (Azad Kashmir), the one in Gujjar Khan drew the most response and audiences were willing to share their personal experiences or knowledge on the subject. However such an undertaking leaves questions unanswered about the motivations behind the project. Presenting her point of view, Salimi explains that one of the incentives was to create a play at a more "professional" level; a play that could draw the more sophisticated and potential sponsor audience of Islamabad to a performance by a better known theatre company. She justifies not extending the project beyond four performances as a means of handling resistant audiences who were often in complete denial of the issue during the early stages of awareness raising. Such a resistance was faced by *Tehrik e Niswan* performers in Jhelum, where I was present and the audience aimed at disrupting the play simply by creating minor disturbances through the performance. To tackle the matter differently, SACH disseminated a video recording of the performance in areas where a large number of the population held dual nationalities, with the help of local cable TV operators who have the capacity to run private airings of movies, plays and recorded shows. The resulting outreach was according to Salimi, far wider than what any given number of performances would have achieved as it drew audiences in the comfort of their own homes and became a stronger channel of communication. The play continues to be shown through cable TV and often target audiences in certain areas are informed of the transmission schedule beforehand to ensure

³³⁸ Anwer Jafri, *Dhiyan Maley Pardes*, (Daughters are Destined to Far Away Lands) *Tehrik e Niswan* Karachi, 2004

viewership. Salimi finds proof of the success of this venture through innumerable letters sent by viewers in support of the play.³³⁹

Akhir Kyun? (But Why?) Tehrik e Niswan 2005-6

Project sponsors: The British Council Pakistan

Tehrik e Niswan's project on Honour Killings was more enduring and far-reaching in numbers compared to the previous one. Commissioned over a period of one year, this British Council sponsored project required *Tehrik e Niswan* to devise a play on the subject on Honour Killings, keeping the population of rural Sindh and Southern Punjab as their target audiences. On behalf of the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the British Council Pakistan initiated a multi-pronged project on honour killing to raise awareness in 2004. A number of initiatives were taken in the form of sensitisation (workshops for the police and press), dissemination through the electronic media (television plays and music video), and performance arts (mobile theatre) to diversify the outreach. *Akhir Kyun* was therefore the theatre performance component of this multi-layered programme.³⁴⁰

The issue of Honour Killing

Honour Killing is a term used to signify the murder of women (and men) under the pretext of restoring or reviving the "lost honour" of the family. Mostly victims of honour killings are accused of inappropriate sexual behaviour that, as claimed by the perpetrators of the murders, led to the loss of "family honour". This "inappropriate behaviour" for which hundreds of women have lost their lives, can include exercising the right to marry or divorce or challenging oppressive traditions such as supporting the right of a daughter to marry through her own choice.³⁴¹ In Pakistan in 2004 alone, 1194 women and men were reported to have been victims of honour killing, a figure that does not necessarily present the full picture as hundreds of cases go unreported.³⁴² Honour Killing is also signified with the term *Karo Kar*³⁴³ in Pakistan's southern

³³⁹ Interview, Khalida Salimi, *ibid*

³⁴⁰ Mundrawala, *ibid*, pp.154-155

³⁴¹ Hassam Qadir Shah, *Don't let them get away with Murder (Booklet on Criminal Procedures)*, Shirkat Gah Women's Resource Centre, Lahore, 2002, p.1

³⁴² "There is no Honour in Murder", *British Council News Pakistan*, September-October 2005, pp.6-7

³⁴³ *Karo*: translated from Sindhi means Black, in this context is used for males. *Kari*: Black, used for females.

province Sindh. However each province has a term for it in its own regional language, and essentially each one means the same: men and women condemned by their family and community as “black” for acts of misconduct.³⁴⁴

Akhir Kyun? Tehrik e Niswan

Development of play

Tehrik e Niswan’s resource material for *Akhir Kyun?* was derived from manuscripts and real life case studies collected from reports by various women’s organisations, from consultations with women lawyers, activists and actors from rural Sindh. Interestingly these actors were members of the CBOs which I have mentioned earlier in this chapter. Included in this production were two members of *Murk Theatre*’s Hyderabad and one of VDWO. Some actors were also drawn from rural CBOs through Bhatti’s contacts with *Aahung*. These actors had been part of *Tehrik e Niswan*’s theatre training workshops conducted under the GEP fund the previous year and had maintained links with the group since. They shared cases known to them or their own personal experiences. Their induction into the play not only enriched the performance but also added authenticity and cultural specificity in terms of local songs, language and dialect. The play is originally developed in Urdu but because of a majority of actors from rural Sindh, it was easy for the play to be performed in Sindhi in the rural areas.

Narrative

The play is constructed around four stories and apart from the first, which is derived from one of the tales of *A Thousand and One Nights*, all of them are dramatised interpretations of case studies. The Thousand Nights episode was part of *Tehrik e Niswan*’s very extensive production in 1998, and the story, which carried themes of honour appropriate for this play, was extracted and adjusted to *Akhir Kyun?*’s requirement. In putting the stories together, *Tehrik e Niswan* drew attention to the fact that men, women and children were all victims of this heinous crime, at the hands of individuals as well as various institutions such as the police, or the local village judiciary known as the *Jirga*³⁴⁵. Of the contemporary stories in *Akhir Kyun?* are narratives of a

³⁴⁴ Hassam Qadir Shah, *ibid*, p.2

³⁴⁵ In 2004, a single bench of the Sindh High Court banned all trials conducted under the *Jirga* system throughout Sindh and held all those violating the law to be charged under the contempt of court law.

young girl Marium, a young man who commits suicide when he cannot cope with family pressures, and Zainab, a 40 year old mother who is killed by her husband because she supports her daughter to marry through choice. Zainab's case, recorded in the Women's Resource Centre Shirkat Gah's Report in 1999, reveals that she was shot by her husband after a 22-year-old marriage for supporting her daughter's marriage to one Sajawal Abro. A case was filed by her family against the head of the Abro clan who had supported Zainab's decision. The family claimed that Zainab was involved in a relationship with Abid Abro and declared her a *Kari*. She received a *Kari's* burial, which meant there was no ritual bathing or funeral prayer and her grave remained unmarked³⁴⁶ The heinous nature of the crime is most evident in the Story of Marium, who was killed by her brothers. Her murder led to Marium being declared a *Kari*, together with her supposed lover, the son of a poor farmer. Consequently the farmer had to pay blood money to save his son from being killed by either the brothers or through a decision of the *Jirga*. The money extorted was just enough for the brothers to purchase a new tractor, the main motivation behind the crime.

Reception and British Council responses

The 60 performances, spread over a period of one year, provoked a mixed reaction amongst the audiences, ranging from vociferous approval, to dismissal, and to verbal exchanges amongst the audience in the postproduction discussions. Asghar Soomro, coordinator for the project on behalf of the British Council explains that the main objective to take this play to the concerned areas was to allow people to "rethink their practices". Given the diversity of the responses, it also allowed the project initiators to identify that section of the society where

Justice Rehmat Hussain Jaffery, in his landmark judgement, said that while under the West Pakistan Criminal Law (amendment) Act 1963, *Jirga* trials were permissible, the law had now been repealed and the *Jirga* system was unlawful and illegal, and against the provisions of the constitution of Pakistan. www.dawn.com, article dated 25 April 2004, accessed 23 May 2006.

In defiance of this, another news report from 2006 proves the dismissal of the word of law where a *Jirga* in Upper Dir issued a verdict in favour of honour killings and warned of dire consequences to those who would report against them. A member of the *Jirga* quoted, "We stick to our verdict that honour killing is permissible and those who commit it will not be liable to any punishment. We will not allow the aggrieved party to report the case to the police or file the case before a court. We will kill those who will violate the *Jirga* verdict". The Senior Superintendent of Police in Upper Dir said that the *Jirga's* verdict was illegal and all cases on honour killings would be registered and those found guilty would be punished according to the law. www.dailytimes.com.pk article dated 20 April 2006, accessed 23 May 2006.

³⁴⁶ Hassam Qadir Shah, *ibid*, p.22

support towards Honour Killings was most prevalent. For example the audience in Jamshoro Sindh consisted largely of intellectuals and educated people who agreed with the message behind the play and in fact some raised the idea that postproduction discussions were detrimental to the effectiveness of the play as it was probably more meaningful to allow the audience to go away with the dramatic impact of the play. On the other hand, certain performances received silent responses, possibly reflecting the inhibition of people to speak up in front of their village elders or their inability to articulate their own opinions. Perhaps, as I mentioned in the case of *Aahung's* communities, this kind of theatre was too alien a form to evoke a response. One extreme response may be cited as a denial towards the seriousness of the crime, when an audience member accused the sponsors of deliberately maligning the regions of rural Sindh and Lower Punjab and giving them a bad name internationally, in order to distract the world from more pending issues of the region.³⁴⁷

Tehrik e Niswan's point of view

Tehrik e Niswan's decision to accommodate community theatre in other aspects of its work reflects the balanced path it wishes to maintain in its practice. Kermani agrees that a project on the scale of *Aakhir Kyun?* would not have been possible without the financial support attached to it. And while the concerns raised in the play reflect *Tehrik e Niswan's* own political commitment, the project was also a means of sustaining the team for a year and allowing actors to receive regular income for their work. It would be worth mentioning that theatre is not a full time profession for *Tehrik e Niswan's* members who are paid a token amount for their performances and rehearsals. At the same time *Tehrik e Niswan* was encouraged to take on the project because it reflected a non-interfering policy and did not confine the theatre group to create a play marred by censorship or restrictions. This freedom meant that the play could represent the negative character of an extremist religious cleric and critiqued the role of the *Jirga* in the Story of Mariam. In an interview, Sheema Kermani suggested that these decisions were slightly precarious as both representations are held in high esteem and the motivations behind the interpretations could have easily been misread.³⁴⁸

³⁴⁷ Interview, Asghar Soomro, Coordinator for British Council Honour Killing Project, Karachi, 22 May 2006

³⁴⁸ Sheema Kermani, interview by email, 24 February 2006

The discussions after the performances follow the formulaic discussion on the narrative, issues portrayed and responses pertaining to these. This non-participatory method as far as the action goes has attracted controversy. Syed Jamil Ahmed observes that, in the practice of one Bangladeshi Community Theatre group Proshika, there was little room for Freirean dialogue and the spectators were unable to participate in a Boalian forum. Plays undertaken by Proshika reflect a message-orientated approach, but leave an uneasy perception that the issues represented easily attract foreign donations and are driven by a Western agenda (women's issues, adult education, primary health care, safeguarding the environment). Given the targets a theatre group sets out to meet, the one way to measure success of such ventures ends up being the quantitative approach, fulfilling required quotas of performances and also assessing financial gains.³⁴⁹

Empowerment or Dispossession?

One of the apparent aspects of commissioned projects I have discussed above, such the ones undertaken by *Tehrik e Niswan*, is the lack of continuity, and the theatre group's [a] very limited role in the larger picture. This defined role for theatre is a huge contrast to the agitative and politically motivated theatre that *Tehrik e Niswan* set out with in the 80's. While there is little denying the fact that *Tehrik e Niswan*'s work is still motivated by its ideology of supporting human rights, there has been a change in the political environment over the years, and its work seems more defined now by financial motivations that are imperative to follow if the group is to continue to survive. Such financial opportunities arise in the form of commissioned projects that not only allow the group to create new work, but also sustain itself over a period of time. It would also be fair to state here that a project such as *Akhir Kyun?* would not have been possible without the British Council funding. The facilitation of its outreach, and its very inception was because the funding body made it possible to happen. And perhaps it would be reasonable to say then, that had *Tehrik e Niswan* initiated a project on such issues on its own, the plays would not be so ambitious in terms of cast numbers, or would not have sustained more than a handful of performances at its own expenses.

³⁴⁹ Syed Jamil Ahmed, "Wishing for a World Without 'Theatre for Development': demystifying the case of Bangladesh", *Research in Drama Education*, Vol.7, No.2, Routledge Journals, Taylor and Francis, UK, 2002, pp.211-212

Undoubtedly the advantages of generously funded projects are seen in their outreach; the British Council sponsored *Tehrik e Niswan* project on Honour Killings was seen by approximately 21,000 people³⁵⁰ and through all its different components, reached a rural population of 100,000 people.³⁵¹ The dilemma lies in the lack of continuity. The Honour Killings project, that demonstrates encouraging responses through large audience attendance, interactive sessions following the performances, the attendance of senior community leaders and the willingness of some members of the clergy to speak out strongly against the issue³⁵², now stands concluded and closed.

The impact of such theatre cannot be quantified in terms of numbers. Certainly the numbers define the outreach statistically, but it is often difficult to gauge what effect it has on the minds of audience members whose values may be engrained in their minds over hundreds of years. The relevance of the British Council's multi-tiered project cannot be denied and while the organisation carried on its work to address honour killings through other components like the electronic media, training, and conferences on the subject, the involvement of *Tehrik e Niswan* is concluded.

But more pertinent than the issue of a lack of continuity however, lies a more grievous matter; the relationship between political activism that is characterised by its radical and political nature, and sustains itself through voluntary work, and the development work which is not political, is motivated by the donors' agenda and is certainly a means of financial income. What emerges through this is that the neoliberal environment dictated by funding, has commoditised the nature of political theatre, which is an instrument for socio-political critique. Activist theatre, which is a socio cultural resource, is transformed and made dependant on market relationships, (what issues are current in the Development agenda and therefore in demand), is uprooted and reinvented to become a source of capital gain for the donors (the funds they receive from international funding bodies), NGOs (the funds they receive from donors on project proposals), and the theatre groups (the funds they receive from NGOs to develop and perform the

³⁵⁰ Interview, Asghar Soomro, ibid

³⁵¹ Project Progress Report, Honour Killing Awareness Campaign in Rural Sindh and Southern Punjab. Completed by Director British Council Marcus Gilbert. July-September 2005 Quarter

³⁵² Project Progress Report, ibid

prescribed plays. It also becomes a means to inculcate very specific notions of both governmentality and modernisation practices (such as health campaigns, birth control or campaigns against discrimination against women).

In a book about how previously considered backward traditional market practices of craftsmen in Cairo have been “seized” upon by social scientists and development institutions as a means towards free market expansion, Julia Elyachar argues that this new economic and cultural value that is now added to the social and cultural networks of the poor has in fact become a means for their economic, social and cultural dispossession. Networks and practices of the poor that were considered to be outside the market were transformed into a key ingredient of market success. The process of free market expansion is part of a range of processes that comes under the title of globalisation and development as new agencies and forms of power emerged with the decline of the state. It is also at the centre of new policies that are implemented by institutions such as the World Bank. Elyachar studies how the cultural practices of the poor have been incorporated into the free market through social experiments and examines the consequences of this multi faceted endeavour to turn community resources into a source of profit.³⁵³

Elyachar describes the value that was produced in workshop exchanges as “relational value” because it was based on the positive value that was associated to creation, reproduction and kinship that had deep historical roots. Once the practices of the workshop craftsmen were identified by development institutions and social scientists as “informal economy, social capital and micro enterprise”, a conceptual shift took place, moving away from what the workshop masters considered value in their own practices towards a broader incorporation of the social practices of the poor into the free market, which ultimately led to a process of dispossession. In the late twentieth century, when in the time of structural adjustment, citizens could not rely on the state for jobs and futures, social scientists and development planners realised that sections of the population that had to survive on their own and be at the mercy of the free market could be reconfigured as a sector of the economy that could be termed as the “informal economy”.

³⁵³ Julia Elyachar, *Markets of Dispossession. NGO's Economic Development and the State in Cairo*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2005, pp.5-6

The most important aspect attached to this was survival. This value of survival ascribed to the workshop production in Cairo added a new dimension to it and facilitated the theorisation of this value in terms of social capital. Social capital became imperative to economic success and central to the ideas regarding the market. The social practices of the workshop masters which provided the source of survival, and which were earlier considered outsider or obstacles, were now in the guise of social capital considered sources for economic growth. This transformation of the social networks of the poor into an economic resource for capital has led to a process of dispossession. The NGOs that were set up in the Egyptian neighbourhood of El Hirafiyeen³⁵⁴ to assist the youth through small loans, encouraged the pursuit of short term individual gains. Such practices of incorporating social practices of the poor into the market yielded notions around what was termed as the “evil eye”; or attacks of misfortune upon those that pursued individual gains over the gain of positive values.³⁵⁵

To understand the production of positive value in the workshop life, Elyachar discusses the example of a workshop master and the notion of value through concepts such as generosity, ongoing exchanges of money, and sociability. Well respected in his community as one who guarded its honour, Samir was the master of a car paint workshop. Though his economic resources were meagre, he was well known for his strengths in the community through a building of strong relationships with his neighbours and associates by extending help through time and money. Whether it was through sending customers to other fellow car workshop masters, or to help people in his neighbourhood in day to day tasks, Samir’s approach exemplifies the anthropological theory of the “gift”, which gives precedence to the value of individuals over the focus on the market or the value of items exchanged. However workshops masters such as Samir do not deny the importance of economic gain. The difference is that profits are not the sole focus of these masters. The master’s work practice may include working for subsidised rates in order to gain a customer, or build networks by working free for a state official with the view that he himself may one day need a favour returned, all contribute

³⁵⁴ El Hirafiyeen was created through an administrative decree by the Egyptian state ministry to house the evicted workshops of three Cairo neighbourhoods. The workshops were evicted because of complaints of disturbance by the neighbourhood, which included powerful players in the state machinery. El Hirafiyeen was created in cooperation with the Social Fund and the Industrial Bank for Development. Elyachar, *ibid*, pp.38-41

³⁵⁵ Elyachar, *ibid*, pp.7-10

towards building relations in his sphere of life. For a master, taking time off from work to help resolve a conflict between two masters or neighbours was never considered a threat to his economic well being. But the value produced in workshop networks is part of a larger field of power of which the state and NGOs are a part. This relational value gained importance in the fields of power as the informal economy assumed importance in the framework of the development institutions. The cultural practices of the poor, once condemned as backward now gained prominence within the framework of social capital as a means to gain capital and a resource for new forms of governance. Negative value was referred to by Masters as the vested interests that other workshop masters gained by means of the NGO, through the pursuit of short-term individual interest in the name of the public good, which sacrificed the relational value attributed to the practice of workshops.

However the pursuit of individual interest and in the economic sphere is also considered legitimate in the on-going life of the workshops in El Hirafiyeen, as long as it is within certain bounds. By favouring common good over individual gain, the workshop master is not denying the economics of a workshop life, which is necessary for his and his family's well being. But such a legitimate pursuit of interest is in sharp contrast to the competition that is pursued by the agent of neoclassic economics. The notion of such competition is read in the Egyptian Arabic language as one linked to negative values of envy and the evil eye. For anyone who pursues individual gain over long-term relationships, becomes one with the evil eye. Apart from this evil eye, Elyachar associates Adam Smith's concept of the "invisible spectator" with that of "conscience" or an internalised concept of "what is right". The invisible spectator ensures that the individual acting in a commercial society acts with an eye to what others might think. This conscience embodies the eyes of one's neighbours or community as part of the formation of the self. Anyone who might ignore the internalised eye of the conscience by pursuing short-term gains invites the attack of the evil eye. When thriving workshops which were a complex system of social relationships were evicted from Cairo to El Hirafiyeen, many masters lost their markets which they had spent a lifetime cultivating. In this case the state, in exercising its institutional power, produced a negative value for the workshop masters.³⁵⁶

³⁵⁶ Elyachar, *ibid*, pp.137-152

In an age of structural adjustment policies, development international financial organisations set about promoting the informal economy with new funding and a new set of organising concepts. They engaged the people with debt with a view to liberate the social networks that were the root of survival for the poor. This process would also liberate the poor from the state as it slowly dismantled in the new structural adjustment order. The marginalized practices of the poor suddenly bore a central place in the era of neoliberalism. In a system where financial and economic discipline was being imposed by international financial organisations through NGOs or through the instruments of debt, indigenous practices and cultural resources were integrated into a global political economy. Such a process has been named by the social theorist Harvey as “accumulation by dispossession”. With reference to her research in Cairo and El Hirafiyen, Elyachar argues that these very processes of valorising the cultural practices of the poor as a form of social capital and by financing them through NGO mediated debt are an aspect of accumulation by dispossession. More importantly, she argues that such a mode of dispossession that speaks the language of empowerment is yet another form of dispossession that is encouraged by neoliberal economic policies such as enforced privatisation and structural adjustment programmes.³⁵⁷

But the commoditisation of theatre as a packaged tool in the development industry is just one of the set backs that may be enumerated in such a discourse. The development apparatus in its role in different contexts of intervention in under developed countries has created many opportunities for debate and analysis. Perhaps one of the most resounding features that may be attributed to such an intervention under the development industry is the *depoliticising* of public life itself. In ways that are not necessarily directly motivated, development programmes have in their implementation created effects that contribute to the depoliticising of society.

In an incisive study of the development apparatus through a rural development project in Lesotho, James Ferguson argues that development institutions generate their own form of discourse, whereby in order to justify intervention in a country they construct an object of

³⁵⁷ Elyachar, *ibid*, pp.26-29

knowledge and an entire structure of knowledge around it, so that interventions may be structured around it accordingly. These interventions have their side effects, such as the expansion and fortification of state power as well as the projection of an economic and social life that denies politics and suspends its effects. This depoliticising of everything by the development apparatus is what Ferguson calls the “anti politics machine”, a mechanism that not only eliminates political realities but also performs its own political operation of expanding bureaucratic power.³⁵⁸

Ferguson's case study centres around a rural development project in Thaba-Tseka Lesotho which was chiefly funded by the World Bank and the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). This small land locked country in Southern Africa gained its independence from the British in 1966. Ferguson lists twenty-seven countries that extended development assistance to Lesotho in the period 1975-84. According to the World Bank, Lesotho received 64 million USD as development assistance in 1979. While the purpose of this aid for all intents and purposes was to alleviate poverty, increase economic output and to reduce Lesotho's dependence on South Africa, it had in its functioning created a substantial development industry in Lesotho, where experts and consultants were employed by the hundreds, working at astonishing rates to produce plans and programmes. While the development assistance aided a range of projects, a large proportion went into rural development projects. What is evident however to most observers is that the history of development assistance in Lesotho has shown a repeated pattern of failure of projects to achieve their objectives. Despite this, it is clear that the norm of failure in the development industry does not discourage newer projects to be launched at the same speed. What is interesting here is that the 1975 World Bank Country Report constructs an image of Lesotho that presents it as a traditional peasant society, untouched by modern economic development before 1966. This is in complete contradiction to academic studies on the country that draw a different picture, showing the presence of migrant wage labour to South African mines, the introduction of plough agriculture, cash and subsistence crops, the growth of colonial and state administration, the development of a capital town, the construction of airports, roads, schools,

³⁵⁸ James Ferguson, *The Anti Politics Machine. “Development,” Depoliticisation and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2007, pp. xiv-xv

churches to name a few, all before 1966. The difference between the two pictures drawn up cannot be attributed to a lack of research on the World Bank's part, but rather to the formation of a particular kind of discourse that is formulated by the development industry to justify its intervention in a given country, and in this case, Lesotho. This peculiar perspective on Lesotho that presents a distortion of reality seems then to be part of the essential steps needed to construct Lesotho as a "Lesser Developed Country" (LDC), in order to set it up for a particular kind of intervention – one that is described by Ferguson as the "technical, apolitical 'development' intervention". While Ferguson acknowledges that the academic discourse also deals with a particular constructed version of the object and that neither of the discourses may be equally adequate, he presents the discontinuity between the two as a means to analyse the distinctly different way in which the development discourse is structured.³⁵⁹

In the development discourse, governmentality is apolitical in nature, where although it is not assumed that a government holds absolute control, it is nevertheless suggested that anything under the state is the determining factor and anything which lies beyond its control is secondary. The state takes on the appearance of a machine delegated to implement the development programmes and an apolitical tool for delivering social services and devise economic growth. In the development discourse on Lesotho, there is no mention of the political character of the state or the use of official positions and state power by the bureaucratic elite. There is a conscious avoidance on matters of undemocratic governance or political opposition. The World Bank Report particularly avoids the mention of politics, and in this representation of Lesotho, the state is seen as having no interests except development, the ruling authoritarian government is viewed as one that attempts to empower the poor through programmes of popular participation, and bureaucracy is seen not as a political matter but a result of poor organisation or lack of training. Outside the state as well, politics is absent in the development discourse and the people are configured as a collection of individual farmers and decision makers. Drawing conclusions from this very detailed theoretical construct, Lesotho is seen as a country with a geography but no history, with people where there is no class division, with an administration without rulers and a bureaucracy devoid of the presence of politics. Reasons

³⁵⁹ Ferguson, *ibid*, pp.3-29

attributed to the impediments towards development are identified as a lack of infrastructure such as roads and markets, a lack of education, of agricultural inputs and unfamiliarity with the money economy. Other reasons which are evident in “non development” discourses such as low wages, political subjugation by South Africa, the bureaucratic elite, only to name a few, simply remain un mentioned.

Confronted by this very peculiar picture of Lesotho in the development discourse, Ferguson is forced to investigate the reasons that lend this discourse its distinctive regularities. After all, he argues, both academic and development discourses are not insulated from each other and share the same traditions of training and thought process. He concludes that the changes perceived between the two discourses are not the collection of thoughts, but rather, the institutional context into which the two discourses are inserted. So, the exclusion of local politics in Lesotho in the World Bank Report is not attributable to a lack of knowledge but rather a choice to leave unspoken a line of thought that is “unhelpful” in the development discourse. An academic analysis on Lesotho that suggests progressive change will be of no use to a development agency unless it provides a licence to the agency to set up an intervention for itself. And here lies the crux of the matter; A report that suggests that the causes of poverty in Lesotho are political and not technical or geographical, that the national government is part of the problem and not a neutral instrument, and that meaningful change can come about with a revolutionary social transformation in South Africa will find no place in the development discourse because *development agencies are not interested in promoting political realignments or supporting revolutionary struggles*. Once the viewpoints outside the scope of its own debate are abandoned, it is easy to understand the motivation of the development discourse to present Lesotho as a promising candidate for an apolitical, technical development agency intervention that it sets out to undertake. The development intervention is described by Ferguson as a highly standardised operation where standardised packages are sold by development agencies to applicants that are deemed suitable by them. One of the main institutional needs of the development agencies is to spend the money they have been assigned to expend and in order to do this they must locate the right kind of “problem” that requires the “solution” they are capable of providing. This explains the institutional context within which the development

discourse is located. It is in this context that Lesotho is set up as a generic Lesser Developed Country, a perfect candidate that requires all the solutions towards prosperity that development agencies are capable of providing. One of the traits such a generic entity must have is the principle of governmentality. Such a principle establishes that the main features of the economy and society must be within the control of a neutral national government so that the agencies may effectively process their work. Since development agencies work with governments and not against them, it suits them to see representations that enhance the role of national policy instruments and those that ignore the political character of the state and bureaucracy.³⁶⁰

Such perceptions can naturally lead to contradictions between theoretical constructs and ground realities, as is evident in the Thaba-Tseka Project in Lesotho. Conceived as a livestock management project with an aim towards increased livestock production, the project's failure to create any transformation in livestock practices revealed the contradictions between the vision of livestock development that emerged from the development discourse, and the actual political and economic structures that governed livestock keeping in Lesotho. The project assumed that the people of the region were backward subsistence farmers, but they were in fact embedded in a capitalist labour reserve economy, and their system of livestock keeping that was attributed to a lack of education and unavailability of technical inputs such as markets and improved stock, was in fact supported by a range of interests at the local level. The idea that livestock was a special category of property, a source of prestige and not merely a commodity in the lives of the people did not feature in the assessment of the development agencies.

Similarly, the project misapprehended its larger political and economic situation as an instrument of the Government of Lesotho and failed to perceive that the goals it had set out to achieve were not necessarily in the interests of the government apparatus. The depolitised conception of the state failed to take into account the power of the state apparatus as beneficial to some and to the detriment of others. The bureaucracy as a vehicle of a particular kind of power and the state as a political apparatus did not find room in the development discourse. In

³⁶⁰ Ferguson, *ibid*, pp.64-72

a bid to introduce a decentralisation system to break the power of the centre's bureaucracy over government services in the districts, the project staff found resistance from the very government they were trying to assist. Because of the development perception of the government being a neutral instrument, the central bureaucracy was never seen as a political fact and a mode to exercise a form of power. Met with fierce political resistance, the project proposal was defeated by the political realities of the Lesotho state. In this Ferguson identifies the contradictions in the role development agencies are intended to play. While on the one hand they are supposed to bring about social change, on the other they are not supposed to get involved in politics and in fact display a strong depoliticising function. But given that any social change cannot be disassociated with political implications, the development projects find themselves in situations that they are unfit to deal with.³⁶¹

The mechanism of the anti politics machine is seen not so much in the recognition of the Thaba-Tseka project's failure of sorts, but rather in its far reaching side effects. While the project could not manage to transform livestock keeping practices, it managed to build a road that connected the region to the capital. The aim to bring about decentralisation did not succeed, but it did give the government of Lesotho a strong presence in the region through a host of government services available there as a direct result of the construction of the project centre and the decision to make that centre the capital of the new district. In the deployment of the development apparatus, these side effects or "instrument effects" become instruments of an exercise of power. If viewed inversely, the side effects of such a project can be seen as the principal effect - the development project of enhancing agricultural growth did not yield the effects it set out to achieve, but the intended agricultural transformation did create a point of entry for an intervention of a completely different nature, that is, the entrenchment of the state's power and its presence in the region. Viewed from this perspective, the development apparatus in Lesotho is not a machine for eliminating poverty that incidentally entrenches the power of the state, but rather a machine for reinforcing state power that incidentally uses poverty as a point of entry. But what is more curious here is that although the development apparatus in Lesotho ends up expanding state power as a side effect while claiming to address the issue of poverty, it

³⁶¹ Ferguson, *ibid*, pp.166-226

does not in either perspective assume its role to be a political one. Ferguson concludes that by reducing poverty to the status of a technical problem which may be addressed with technical solutions, the hegemonic problematic of development becomes the principal means through which the question of poverty is depoliticised in the world today. By projecting its more visible intentions, the development apparatus can end up being involved in sensitive political operations of enhancing state power invisibly, under the guise of a technical and neutral mission. Hence the instrument effect of the development apparatus can consequently be perceived as two fold: along with the institutional effect of expanding state power, can be seen the conceptual effect of depoliticising both poverty and the state.³⁶²

Suffice to say that such concepts bear a familiar ring in the development-funded culture of theatre where notions of market relationships dominate and override the essence of theatre as an instrument of socio political critique or artistic expression. In depoliticising the role of theatre and transforming it into a commodity, it is altered into an entity that depends on market relationships. In the development discourse, the government stands aside as a neutral instrument facilitating the growth of agencies or service providers that bear the solutions to issues women's oppression, child abuse, health or education. Within the development context, market relationships may define the award of contracts, or the efficacy or suitability of one theatre group to fulfil objectives within a time frame. In the context of theatre groups outside the development framework but still dependant on finances, the market relationships may define the nature of the work itself. A corporate funding may generate a play suitable for a charity evening but one that is distantly removed from the group's original political ideals, or a commissioned project that neatly and aesthetically projects the agenda of its financier. In such situations, theatre as a standardised and commoditised packaged tool not only becomes a means of inculcating certain notions of governance, but also becomes a source of accumulating capital, be it for the NGOs or for the theatre groups themselves.

As a continuation of the preceding argument, I discuss in the following chapter Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* methodology which aimed at emancipating the oppressed

³⁶² Ferguson, *ibid*, pp.251-256

through action. Boal's methods have been used liberally throughout the world in Development projects, and I discuss their employment in Pakistan's context through the Interactive Resource Centre (IRC). Based in Lahore, the IRC operates as a training centre for Boal's methods and offers its services to community based organisations and their workers. While Boal's theories and methods have been critiqued and analysed many years after their inception, I draw attention to their isolated use in the work of the IRC, reflecting the imposition of the Development agenda on communities it reads in standardised and generic patterns.

CHAPTER 6

Methodologies of Impact

In this chapter I aim to discuss Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) methodology with a view to understand the theoretical background of this movement which has largely influenced theatre practitioners around the world, especially in the field of development.

In the earlier chapters I have discussed Boal's arguments of Aristotle's Poetics Of Oppression, through which a spectator delegates all power to the protagonist in a dramatic act and is unable to think and act for himself. I have set this argument against what Boal calls the intermediary step between Aristotle's Poetics of the Oppression and Boal's own *Poetics of the Oppressed*, through Brecht's poetics in which the spectator delegates the power to a protagonist to act in his place but reserves his right to think for himself. This role of raising a critical consciousness is evident in the work of the politically aware theatre of both *Ajoka* and *Tehrik e Niswan*.

I now assess the impact of Boal's TO as a tool to emancipate the spectator to act and think for himself in a dramatic action as a means to train himself for action in real life. Boal's methodology has influenced many a theatre groups around the world and is used by practitioners as a means to empower the oppressed. While this method has had many followers, and many theoreticians have written about it, it has also become a vital tool in the development paradigm, and is used liberally in donor driven projects. I use one such example from Pakistan, the Interactive Resource Centre (IRC) based in Lahore, which uses Boal's TO methodology to train grassroots communities around Pakistan, but is an exclusive training centre that conducts short term workshops for this training. Mostly funded by donor agencies from the west, the IRC flourishes as an exclusive training centre for those who can afford its high fees and training packages. I use this example as a means to reinforce the argument that development agencies view projects in a generic manner and offer standardised solutions to the issues at hand.

I include in the chapter arguments for Theatre for Development by practitioners who consider it important if practiced with a critical understanding as well as with a view to draw in the community rather than as an imposed intervention. I also look at the canonical status Boal's arguments have achieved and include discussions that critique Boal for the simplification in his arguments. I conclude the chapter with arguments by writers who critique the role of the western donor agencies in imposing a neoliberal culture on communities in developing nations and discuss the problematics of the system when Boal's methods are employed by NGOs without the necessary research and awareness.

Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed

"The theatre is a weapon and it is the people who should wield it".

"No matter that the action is fictional; what matters is that it is action".³⁶³

As opposed to Aristotle's *Poetics of Oppression* in which the spectator delegates all power to think and act to the protagonist in the dramatic action, Boal's *Poetics of the Oppressed* enables the spectator to think and act for himself, thereby assuming the protagonic role. The spectator is able to try different solutions, make changes in the dramatic action and therefore prepares for real action. In devising this system, Boal emphasised the use of theatre as a language, capable of being used by any person, literate or not, with or without artistic talent. In putting theatre at the service of the oppressed, Boal asserts that this new language can help people discover new concepts.

Boal devises a systematic plan to transform the spectator into actor in an outline of four stages. The first two concern themselves with the body. According to Boal, a theatrical experience for people who have never heard of theatre is likely to be distorted by their knowledge of other media that they are more easily exposed to, such as television. This may associate in their minds the notion of leisure or frivolity with that of theatre. Therefore theatrical experience should begin not with something alien to them (theatrical techniques that are taught or imposed upon them), but rather with the bodies of those who agree to participate in the experiment.³⁶⁴ A series of exercises are devised to understand and know one's body, its limitations as well as its possibilities. Boal describes these exercises as those designed to "undo" the muscular functions of the body and raise it to a different level of consciousness, allowing each participant to understand how his body is governed by his work.³⁶⁵ These along with the second stage exercises and games to bring out the body's more expressive functions are the precursors to Boal's more complex exercises which engage theatre as a language that is living and present (as opposed to a finished piece of work that refers to images from the past). It is necessary to understand that Boal emphasises that in each of the two initial stages,

³⁶³ Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, Translated from the Spanish, Charles A, Maria Oilia Leal Mc Bride, Pluto Press, London, 1998, p.122

³⁶⁴ *ibid*, p.127

³⁶⁵ *ibid*, pp.126 - 128

the participant must be encouraged to devise other games so that he is not a passive recipient of entertainment that comes from the outside.

Beyond these preparatory stages, Boal introduces the third stage, which encourages the direct participation of the spectator. Titled "Theatre as Language", this stage is subdivided into three areas known as *Simultaneous Dramaturgy*, *Image theatre* and *Forum theatre*. In each of these sections, the spectator is encouraged to intervene in the action and transit from a passive to an active state, thereby abandoning his state from an *object* to that of a *subject*. Each of these states, or *degrees* as Boal refers to them, is a gradual progression that takes the spectator towards direct participation in the action.

Simultaneous Dramaturgy

In this stage, the spectator experiences intervention without being physically present on stage. Actors perform a short scene, based on the suggestions of a local resident. The performance may be scripted beforehand or improvised directly and is more relevant if the person who has proposed the scene is present in the audience. In the performance the actors move to a point where the main problem reaches a crisis and then invite solutions from the audience. All the suggested solutions are given equal importance and the actors act each solution. This exercise changes the idea of action being presented in a deterministic fashion, and the actors are expected to accept all proposals without any protest. Thus the role of the actor changes from one who interprets the text of a single writer to that of an interpreter of a mass audience, giving expression to collective thought.³⁶⁶ The audience has the right to intervene, make corrections and actors are obliged to implement each instruction. This puts the audience member in the position of a "writer" and his thoughts are directly expressed on stage through the action of the actors. Boal emphasises that the discussion or solution need not take the form of words alone and must be accompanied by all other aspects of theatrical expression.

³⁶⁶ *ibid*, p.134

Image theatre

Image theatre is the next stage, which allows the spectator to intervene more directly. A participant is invited to “sculpt” an image with the bodies of the other participants, based on any theme of common interest that he wishes to discuss. These themes may be as abstract or as specific as the participant chooses. Using the bodies of other participants, he formulates an image representing his idea, and sculpting the bodies of the participants in a manner that makes his idea evident. He is not allowed to speak and is expected to pay attention to every detail in the image. The ensuing result is then discussed by all the participants to determine whether everyone agrees on the representation of the sculpted image. Discussions may encourage alterations and these are conducted until there is a general agreement on the “actual image”. The participant is then asked to sculpt an *ideal image* – that is, how he would like the image to be. This done, he is then asked to devise a transitional image – how he would reach from one reality to another. This evidently forms an important part of the exercise as it questions how transformation may be carried out. This form of theatre is important in its capacity to make thought visible.

Forum theatre

This stage enables the spectator to actively intervene in the dramatic action and change it. Participants are invited to suggest a situation with a political or social problem. A short skit portraying the problem and its solution is presented to members of the audience, who are then asked whether they agree with the solution presented. If any person in the audience disagrees with the solution presented, he is informed that the skit will be re enacted but this time the person who has raised an objection to the solution has the right to replace any of the actors and lead the action in a manner he deems appropriate. The displaced actor steps aside, but must be ready to take his place once the person intervening feels that he has presented his point of view. The remaining actors must be able to participate in the action according to how the intervener leads the action. Boal emphasises that the person intervening must not simply talk but follow all the actions that were performed by the actor he replaced. This according to Boal, is to bring across the idea that often revolutionary ideas are advocated in forums without the realisation that they are not so easy to bring into practice.

In an experiment with 12 to 17 year old homeless children of the streets in Brazil, Boal used both *image* and *forum theatre* to pursue a single example. When he asked a 14 year old girl to depict an image of the family through statues, she created a drunken father, a housewife, a drug addict brother, another brother turned religious having conversations with God, and herself as a prostitute. Interestingly none of the children disagreed with this notion of the family, as it did not conflict with their ideas. Boal then asked the audience to replace any one such character from the group who would make a difference to the dynamics of the family. The majority agreed that the religious brother be replaced. *Forum theatre* that followed allowed the young audience to change the action of the religious brother and create a more positive contribution for him. He was alternatively depicted as talking to his relatives instead of to God, forcing his father and addict brother to take action to handle their lives, and making his father interact with the family.³⁶⁷

Boal calls these theatrical forms *rehearsals for revolution*, whereby the spectator-actor practices a real act while experiencing it in a fictional manner. There is no cathartic experience here as Forum theatre, instead of taking the power away from the spectator evokes him to practice in reality what he has rehearsed on stage.³⁶⁸

Stage Four - Theatre as Discourse

Boal has described the earlier stages of his methods as forms of rehearsal theatre, but in this final stage, he advocates some forms of more finished theatre as well. Boal identifies seven categories within this stage that act as simple forms of what he calls “spectacles”, based on themes that a spectator-actor may need to discuss or rehearse.

A short summary of the categories and their characteristics is listed below:

- *Newspaper theatre* – Daily news items are transformed into theatrical performances through simple techniques like reading, rhythmic reading, action paralleled with reading and improvisations.

³⁶⁷ Mady Shutzman and Jan Cohen-Cruz (eds.), *Playing Boal. Theatre, therapy, activism*, Routledge, London and New York, 1994, pp.81-83.

³⁶⁸ Boal, *ibid*, pp.141-142

- *Invisible theatre* – A scene is presented in any environment other than the theatre. The venues may be public places, and the scene is witnessed by people who are there by chance.
- *Photo romance* – Lines from plots of popular romance novels are read to participants without telling them the source. Participants are then asked to act out what they understand from the reading and their presentation is compared with the actual story as it is told in the romance novel.
- *Breaking of repression* – A participant is asked to recall a moment when he was repressed, accepted that repression and acted in compliance to the repression. He may now enact the story with the help of other participants. The scene is recreated with the same sentiments and circumstances of the original event. The protagonist is now asked to re enact this scene, and resist the repression that he faced. The remaining actors in the scene maintain their original role, but the protagonist must fight to impose his will and carry out in fiction what he was unable to do in reality.
- *Myth theatre* – These sessions unravel the truth behind myths, and logically relate a story to reveal the truth behind myths.
- *Analytical theatre* – Participants analyse an enacted story that has been selected by one from the audience. The characters are broken down into social roles and participants are asked to choose objects to symbolise these roles. The story is now re-enacted after taking away some of the symbols from each character and some of the social roles as well.
- *Rituals and Masks* – These processes aim to reveal the structures of a society, the rituals which reify human relationships, and the masks of behaviour that those rituals impose on every person according to the role he plays in society.³⁶⁹

As a step ahead of Brecht's "preparation for action", Boal describes his *Poetics of Oppression* as the poetics of liberation, whereby the spectator empowers himself by acting and thinking for himself. For Boal, the spectator assuming a passive role needs to be humanised

³⁶⁹ Boal, *ibid*, pp.142-154

and his capacity for action restored. In asserting this, Boal does not assume that the theatre is revolutionary, but it is certainly “a rehearsal for revolution”.

Theatre of the Oppressed – the tools for liberation

Many writings have emerged that examined the efficacy of TO and its potential to initiate change. In the words of Boal, the goal of Theatre of the Oppressed is to *dynamise*, not to create equilibrium but rather, *disequilibrium*, and therefore prepare the way for action. This dynamisation, which creates the action, destroys all the blocks in an individual's head that prohibited the realisation of actions. In doing so, it purifies the spect-actor and produces a catharsis – as Boal puts it, a catharsis of detrimental blocks.³⁷⁰

In examining the efficacy of Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, Eva Osterlind examines Boal's methods through a discussion on Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, a term that finds its etymological root in terms like *habit*. Bourdieu uses the term *habitus* to describe social reproduction and the *lack of change*. *Habitus* is located in traditions, lifestyles, in the mind and inscribed in the body. According to Bourdieu, *habit* is *resistant to change*. *Habitus* is formed as new information and experiences create impressions in our early life experiences. We inherit social patterns and experience these as natural and necessary, and determine how we perceive the world. The phenomenon of *habitus* is internalised as a second nature. These inner structures maintain social structures, and *habitus* resists new information and all forms of change. From childhood, *habitus* shapes the way an individual perceives life and relates to the future. Habits of resistance to change create what Bourdieu calls a structural lag between opportunities and a disposition to grasp them, leading to missed opportunities. While the concept of *habitus* speaks of the persistence of a status quo, structural aspects that determine how we interpret things, act and think, are inscribed in our bodies and how we carry ourselves. More importantly however, even though *habitus* resists change, neither inner nor outer conditions are impossible to change.³⁷¹

³⁷⁰ Augusto Boal, *The Rainbow of Desire. The Boal Method of Theatre and Therapy*. Tr. Adrian Jackson, Routledge, London, 2003, pp.72-73

³⁷¹ Eva Osterlind, “Acting out of habits – can Theatre of the Oppressed promote change? Boal's theatre methods in relation to Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*”, *Research in Drama Education*, Vol.13, No.1, Routledge Journals, Taylor and Francis, UK, February 2008, pp.71-74

Osterlind argues that internal change is necessary for external change and while Bourdieu's theory *reveals* general patterns and social structures, Boal's methods aim to *achieve* change in specific situations. The writer makes a connection between habitus and what Boal calls osmosis, or interpenetration. Like habitus, osmosis emerges everywhere – in the family, in work, in school, advertising and also in the theatre. In mainstream theatre, the stage presents images of social life in a manner that is unalterable by the audience. This de activation of the audience creates an intransitive osmosis, from stage to audience. Boal calls the conventional theatre ritual conservative, and like habitus, opposed to progress – *immobiliste*. Boal aims that the TO inverts this “immobilisme” and makes dialogue between stage and audience transitive in both directions. The stage can try to transform the audience but the audience may also transform anything.³⁷²

Boal's Rainbow of Desire (RD) methodology uses the metaphor of “cop in the head” (the policeman representing society, state, inner oppression), and suggests that the inner oppressor is the result of culturally shaped patterns. The RD methodology aims to assist possibilities of change and support liberation from given roles and rituals. Osterlind relates an account of and RD workshop Boal conducted in India where a participant expressed her inner desires and stepped out of her personal habitus. Boal's account of this workshop elaborates the exercise when he invited the audience to create images representing marriage. A young woman initially made images that represented her husband's desires (killing herself or leaving her home), but then went on to express her own inner desires (seducing him and trying to kill him). In engaging with this exercise, the young woman created herself as the protagonist.³⁷³ Leaving her narrative behind Boal invited the participants to continue working on the same theme, as it was considered to be a common issue or problem. The positive response of the participants proved that their habitus on a group level was changed and expanded. The willingness of the participants to talk created the prerequisite for change beyond the individual level.³⁷⁴

³⁷² Augusto Boal, *The Rainbow of Desire. The Boal Method of Theatre and Therapy*, *ibid*, pp.41-42

³⁷³ Boal, *ibid*, p. 187

³⁷⁴ Osterlind, *ibid*, p. 77

In Bourdieu's description of habitus, change can only occur in the event of some extraordinary circumstance and we are only able to overcome habitus in a situation of crisis. Boal on the other hand is determined that rules may be broken and that change is possible. For him, resignation is a crime and his methods have evolved tools that allow the visualisation and expression of patterns of thinking and behaving. Boal's theatre techniques have the potential to allow towards the transition from insight to action. He has developed methods that emphasise the need for both personal and political change in all kinds of societies. Inner oppression is not nullified because of the existence of outer oppression and the two compound each other. Boal's methods make habitus, hierarchies power relations visible in both the personal and the societal levels. Bourdieu's research also reveals the necessity to work on both the personal and the social level. Bourdieu, like Boal sees the political in the personal and recognises how inner structures support and maintain social structures and vice versa. Osterlind cautions that the problem in TO can occur when either the personal or the social/ political aspects are forgotten. If both dimensions are present, personal liberation within a social context can prove to be very powerful. TO's potential to promote change lies in its ability to make visible social structures and hierarchies, in its integrated approach to the individual and the group, and its capacity to provide tools for change towards action through the body, feelings and thoughts.³⁷⁵

Theatre of the Oppressed in the Development paradigm

In an article dated 1998, Tim Prentki advocates the integration of Theatre for Development in the Development agenda in the UK, because of its essential characteristic of being a non-literary form of dialogic communication that creates a safe place for fiction. This safe place provides an opportunity to examine alternatives to the realities that a community exists in and allows people to become subjects of their own histories rather than objects. For Prentki, theatre, with its immense transformative potential is an ideal form that can meet the goals of Development, which aims to change peoples' material, social, political or cultural conditions.³⁷⁶

³⁷⁵ Osterlind, *ibid*, pp. 77 - 80

³⁷⁶ Tim Prentki, "Must the Show go on? The Case for Theatre for Development", *Development in Practice*, Vol.8, No.4, Carfax Publishing Ltd., November 1998, pp.419-420

However Prentki finds that Development agencies are reluctant to use Theatre for Development (TfD) because of a lack of understanding of both its potential and its processes. Specific to the UK, the writer observes that organisations such as the British Department for International Development (DFID) and the NGO sector perceive TfD as an art based activity and therefore not very high on the priorities of the development agenda. This limited understanding makes them unable to identify TfD's processes that enable the oppressed in a community to engage with their realities. Additionally TfD practitioners according to Prentki are drawn from branches of theatre with little understanding of the philosophies or methodologies of the development process and tend to work from project to project. There is also a lack of effort to train for TfD processes within NGOs, which creates a limited understanding amongst development workers of the meaning of TfD.

In drawing out a history of TfD practices within development from the 70's to the 90's Prentki defines the 70's as a time when it was used as a propaganda tool by the NGOs. Here the emphasis was on emanating messages from the point of view of governments, NGOs and multi nationals to the recipients. The shift from modernisation to participation in the development paradigm came about when in the 90's "participation" became the new development watchword. TfD began to be perceived as an effective way to secure the participation of communities, allowing for methods that propagated "doing" rather than mere listening. However this shift towards participation was a mere change in tactic rather than of agenda in development and the essentially participation was considered appropriate as long as the communities were participating according to the terms set by the development agencies. Therefore the transaction was only one sided, from the centre to the periphery or from the First to the Third world.³⁷⁷

Prentki discusses the necessary measures that must be taken into account if TfD is to be effective within the Development paradigm, so that TfD is taken from its limited role as a "tool in the NGO worker's kit bag in the service of the dominant discourse of development practice, to a process of practical analysis and critique in the service of those who seek [...] to change the

³⁷⁷ Tim Prentki, "Save the Children? Change the World" *Research in Drama Education*, Vol.8, No.1, Routledge Journals, Taylor and Francis, UK, 2003, p.40

world".³⁷⁸ In development practices, it is an accepted argument that organisations must engage with the total cultural dimension of a community. Real participation according to Prentki can be effective if a cultural monoculture is replaced by more specific indigenous knowledge of the communities that agencies work with. Methods of Forum Theatre incorporate indigenous performance traditions in areas of story telling, dance and music. If community members see their own language of culture validated in this manner, there is a build up of confidence as well as trust with the facilitators.³⁷⁹

Prentki emphasises that for any social transformation to take place, it is necessary for the development process to take into account the affective aspects of human beings. Unless the emotional needs of the participants are taken into account, TfD will not gain any credibility as a method that offers a sustainable alternative to prevailing realities. Theatre is best suited as a development tool if it takes account of passion to expose all the factors which contribute to human behaviour. Unless TfD takes into account the structures of feeling which strengthen injustices, change will be difficult to achieve.³⁸⁰

One of the main limitations that Prentki identifies in the effective use of TfD is that of time constraints. When working with communities that have been afflicted with oppression, it is unrealistic to assume that the TfD process will be implemented rapidly. It is necessary for TfD facilitators to have time to integrate within a community and be able to gain its trust. To counter time constraints, Prentki suggests alternatives that may be necessary compromises but nevertheless effective solutions. For one, he suggests that facilitators use the material, gestures and words belonging to the community in the performances, thereby becoming the voice of the disempowered. In a situation that may exhibit a cultural taboo, the facilitator is able to confront the local hierarchy and speed up a process of transformation by for example becoming the voice of women in a society where they are not allowed to speak in front of men.

³⁷⁸ Tim Prentki, "Save the Children? Change the World", *ibid*, p.39

³⁷⁹ Tim Prentki, "Must the Show go on? The Case for Theatre for Development", *ibid*, p.424

³⁸⁰ Tim Prentki, "Save the Children? Change the World", *ibid*, p.41

What comes out here more importantly through the cultural emphasis of development, such as facilitator's use of local words and language in his work process, is also the aim to ultimately make the community the owner of the TfD processes and the necessity for the community to take ownership of the process of TfD on a permanent basis. TfD allows for the community to take ownership of their objectives through participation. So while TfD may be facilitated by an external agency, it is imperative that a community, in order to articulate critical reflection, takes ownership of the form in the process towards sustainable self-development. The TfD process which mobilises the audience to become spect-actors begins with the process when facilitators conduct an initial research with a community to identify issues of concern. The facilitators then develop a sketch based on an issue and perform it for the community, leaving it open to suggestions so that the audience may offer solutions. As is often the case, a member of the audience is invited to replace an actor in the scene and try out alternatives. This progress for an individual who crosses over from a position of silence and powerlessness, to discovering a voice can be an empowering experience. By integrating with a community, the facilitators are able to present a sketch or scene of issues that is close to the realities of the community. The audience may intervene in a sketch presented by the facilitators to correct any details and take the representation of the issue further into action. For sustainability, the facilitator must aim for the community to take over the process, and own the content and the form of the discourse presented. If facilitators can bear in mind that TfD, its processes and its goals belong to the community and not to them, it can be a development tool that provides an opportunity for full grassroots participation in the cultural life of a community in addressing issues of identity, gender and power. With these processes, a community may be able to create its own agendas, take control of the development processes and transform it into a process of self development beyond what the input of facilitators have to offer.³⁸¹

Prentki warns that if an NGO worker enters into a community with a pre set agenda of issues which his organisation deems important, there will be an immediate distortion of experience. If importance is not given to the cultural aspects of the community (such as integrating processes like storytelling) in the research stage, there can be a gap between how

³⁸¹ Prentki, "Must the Show go on? The Case for Theatre for Development", *ibid*, pp.421-427

the community understands itself and how it is perceived by the NGO. Prentki advises the facilitator to hear all the stories that emerge from a community, refrain from mediating them in order to create a master narrative, and thereby make the research process more thorough. Having said that however, Prentki reminds us that devices of engagement with the theatre process and a meticulously participatory approach to story telling can overwhelm the process of interaction between the performers, the performance and the audience. This interaction is essential for developing a dialogue through which transformation takes place. It is essential for facilitators to remember that the performance must be understood as part of a larger TfD process and that it functions as a research and advocacy tool.³⁸²

Despite its potential as a process of empowerment, TfD has often been misrepresented within the development paradigm. Prentki observes that TfD is all too often confined to the role of the “performance arm” of a project, used by a development agency to transmit ideas in a monological fashion, rather than as a dialogue between the community and the external agency, or between various sects within a community. In the result oriented world of development, there is often the chance of TfD to be viewed *as a development tool* where the outcome is evaluated in terms of non theatrical processes, such as making a community agree to follow an organisation’s development practices. This is fairly distinct from theatre being viewed *as development* where development gains are contained in the experience of using theatre as a tool of communication itself. Given that the latter, *theatre as development*, offers less tangible results, it is often more difficult to convince funding agencies to finance these projects.³⁸³

Prentki displays through the example of an Indian grassroots organisation the problems that may be faced if TfD processes are not adhered to. Known as Social Action Groups (SAG), these organisations have been working for many decades in India. The members of the SAG theatre component however do not work closely with other components of the programme, and the actors prioritise scripted, improvised plays rather than dialogue with the community. While

³⁸² Tim Prentki, “Save the Children? Change the World”, *ibid*, pp.42 - 45

³⁸³ Prentki, “Must the Show go on? The Case for Theatre for Development”, *ibid*, p.427

the idea of participation is central to the essential ideology of the SAG, involving people at all levels and encouraging the community to take initiatives, many weaknesses have been identified in its theatre work. The plays are based on borrowed scripts and do not encompass the local issues at hand. In this way these plays present a form of monologue that the community is faced with. The plays create a contradiction in form and content – messages of empowerment are delivered in ways that do not allow the community to interact, therefore leaving them passive and dependent.³⁸⁴

In another example of a TfD training workshop in Bangladesh, where a presentation was based on the subject of raising money for a dowry, Prentki noticed a significant gap in consciousness between the community members and the NGO facilitators. While community members discussed how to negotiate the problem by lessening the pressure of the dowry system on the family, the facilitators kept trying to direct the discussion towards a negation of the practice entirely. It was clear that the community was not ready to take a step away from traditions that were deeply ingrained in their mindsets. The stance of the facilitators showed their imposition of ideas and agendas upon a community that had chosen the issue for discussion. So while the NGO workers had allowed the stories to emerge from the community without any mediation on their part, their own ingrained habits of development training had made them keen to impose their interpretation of the story on the community.³⁸⁵

Prentki asserts the need for aid agencies and NGOs to root TfD firmly in their policies so that it is constantly used as part of their programmes and is not a “light hearted piece of window dressing” that is confined to projects that have no impact on the organisations’ main work. It is imperative for NGOs to train their activists in the techniques of TfD so that there is no separation between theatre and other aspects of development. Given the advantages of theatre – its capacity to cultivate participation, its lack of dependency on technology, its ability to explore indigenous forms, it is a form that best responds to the needs of grassroots self-development.³⁸⁶

³⁸⁴ Prentki, “Must the Show go on? The Case for Theatre for Development”, *ibid*, p.428

³⁸⁵ Tim Prentki, “Save the Children? Change the World”, *ibid*, p.50

³⁸⁶ Prentki, “Must the Show go on? The Case for Theatre for Development”, *ibid*, p.429

An alternative reading of Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed

Boal's place in the canon of modern theatre theory is confirmed by the proliferation of literature on his theories as well as the fact that his Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) techniques are considered a means toward progressive social change. His methods are employed by many development organisations that advocate the use of Theatre for Development (TfD) in the advancement of issues that pertain to communities they engage with.

In a paper that contests the singularly unchallenged theories expounded by Boal, Paul Dwyer highlights the linearity with which Boal sets his argument against Aristotle's *Poetics* in order to argue his theoretical position. Dwyer contends that while Boal presents an oversimplified view of relations between theatre and the state in Ancient Greece through Aristotle, he nevertheless makes a convincing account of the struggle of making theatre a tool for social change in the context of the coercive dictatorships in Brazil in 1964 and 1968. However, it is not within this context that Boal's theories are taken up by theatre practitioners in the West who are engaged in programs concerning health or welfare. For Dwyer, Boal's critique of Aristotle is not only biased but also one that leads to an unlikely claim for TO to be a radical alternative. While Dwyer suggests that some extensions of TO have been employed by practitioners to accommodate the shift in the context from its origination in Latin America to First World settings, so that TO has become an umbrella for a diverse set of practices, Boal's critique of Aristotle is still given a canonical status. According to Dwyer, Aristotle's position is constructed by Boal in his implication that Aristotle's model of tragedy is a coercive system that was designed in the interest of the dominant ideology of the Athenian state and to protect the vested interests of its wealthy citizens. Boal also suggests that not only did the *Poetics* operate as a hegemonic instrument in its time, it also lay down an outline of sorts for modern repressive uses of theatre.³⁸⁷

Dwyer suggests that there is an element of selectiveness in Boal's interpretation of empathy, and catharsis that carries more meaning in Aristotle's works. Boal combines two interpretations of "catharsis" expounded by Bucher; in didactic theories, catharsis allows the

³⁸⁷ Paul Dwyer, "Theoria Negativa. Making Sense of Boal's Reading of Aristotle", *Modern Drama*, Volume 48:4, University of Toronto Press, Winter 2005, pp.635-637

audience to learn from the protagonist's mistakes and in outlet theories catharsis purges the audience of dangerous emotions it. It is through the emotions of pity and fear that the spectators are linked to the tragic hero, and the spectators are forced to identify some vice in the hero. When some tragedy befalls the hero, the spectator's identification with that vice is purged through catharsis. Dwyer contends that Boal simplifies the use of pity and fear in order to explain the notion of empathy or identification with the hero, and argues that Aristotle's commentary on the emotions is more diverse. While Aristotle writes in his *Poetics* that pity is felt towards one whose affliction is undeserved, and fear is felt towards one who is like ourselves, he also writes in the *Rhetoric* that excessive fear can drive out pity. Hence one can read through this that a delicate balance need be maintained between our fears and altruistic sense of pity and therefore spectators must not lose themselves completely in totally identifying with the hero. But Boal's reading insists that the Aristotelian spectator must completely identify with the tragic hero and "vicariously live all his stage experiences".³⁸⁸

Dwyer finds Boal's notion of the "coercive system of Greek tragedy" attributed to Aristotle as one that fails to acknowledge the previous playwrights of tragedies, written from fifty to hundred years before Aristotle, such as Sophocles, Aeschylus and Euripides. And, if for Boal the essence of Aristotle's system has pervaded into the popular media, television, movies, and theatre, Dwyer also questions a progressive theatre movement such as TO's assumption that all spectators of mainstream performance are absolutely incapable of reading beyond the obvious. Another unconvincing aspect Dwyer identifies is Boal's elevating of Aristotle's *Poetics* as the standard against which his argument for Theatre of the Oppressed as a radical break from tradition may be set against. This limits the history of theatre as a conservative one where all theatre begins with the Greeks. Such a position displays a lack of acknowledgement of alternate theatre histories that would include various forms of popular entertainment and performance genres that are not necessarily received by a disciplined audience or adhere to the use of a written text. Such an analysis ignores the potential of popular forms of plays (such as medieval plays) to function as conveyors of power struggles between authorities and popular audiences. It is possible that Boal does not address this issue because he is arguing right from

³⁸⁸ Dwyer, *ibid*, pp.643-645

the outset that popular theatre is declining and the audience's freedom is lost. Ultimately TO relies on a model of relationship between dominant and oppositional ideologies. If TO is to link itself to political action, it must be according to Dwyer, a contested cultural practice and one of many voices that challenge the status quo. TO runs the high risk of being co-opted into officially sanctioned conservative political agendas unless its practitioners evolve a theory that goes beyond rhetoric of anti Aristotelianism.³⁸⁹

The Interactive Resource Centre

I now turn the discussion towards the Interactive Resource Centre (IRC), and NGO based in Lahore, that serves as a training centre for Forum Theatre methodologies to theatre groups connected to NGOs or grassroots organisations. This centre trains groups mostly in the form of one-week workshops and focuses on this aspect as one of the main areas of its work. Its association with communities is minimal and it only handles requests for workshops from NGOs or organisations that can afford its high fee to train their members for a weeklong period. Founded by Mohammed Waseem, the IRC aims to “develop and experiment innovative techniques in interactive communication to increase outreach and effectiveness of the social change process”.³⁹⁰

IRC - History

Mohammed Waseem began his association with theatre with *Ajoka* in 1983, while working for a travel agency to sustain his financial needs. In 1985, he left *Ajoka* to join a newly established theatre group *Lok Rehas*, which differed ideologically from *Ajoka* in its emphasis on working in the provincial Punjabi language. He simultaneously made a shift in his career and began work as a sales representative with a multi national pharmaceutical firm. This occupation gave him more time to work with theatre and while his career advanced he also began to establish himself as a key member of the theatre group. This was also a time when Waseem had the opportunity to attend theatre-training workshops organised through the Goethe Institute, the British Council and the American Centre. An opportunity to attend a workshop in the Philippines

³⁸⁹ Dwyer, *ibid*, pp.646-653

³⁹⁰ Afifia Khaliq, “A Profile of Interactive Resource Centre”. *IRC Publicity Brochure*. (date unknown), p.1

at the Philippines Education and Theatre Association in 1989 exposed him to theatre practitioners who were influenced by the work of Augusto Boal. On his return from the Philippines he took part in plays, several of which he directed, allowing him to gain more experience in the field of direction.

When in 1996, his pharmaceutical firm employers transferred him to Peshawar, logistics made it difficult for him to travel to Lahore on the weekends to continue theatre. Despite a handsome salary, Waseem decided to quit his job in favour of working full time with *Lok Rehas*. This option did not promise any financial prospects and even working for a salary did not present him the same emoluments that his multinational job had to offer. Ending a fifteen year association with *Lok Rehas*, Waseem offered his services as a trainer to the NGOs South Asia Partnership Pakistan (SAP-PK) and the Church World Service (CWS) with the intention to “test the ground for a alternative means of making a living where theatre could possibly be part of the curriculum”.³⁹¹ Integrating theatre as part of the training began a series of associations with NGOs and organisations that had identified theatre as a tool for effective communication. His following project with UNDP began an enduring association with the use of theatre in the development context. Waseem’s increasing association with the CWS allowed him the opportunity to train several theatre groups in its Capacity Building Programme. Aware of, and interested in Freire’s participatory dialogue methods, Waseem began training theatre groups among partner organisations of the CWS. Links with other organisations such as the Aurat Foundation and The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan extended his field of work and Waseem’s methodology drew the attention of NGOs, thereby attracting funding for larger outreach. These two organisations had begun work with SAP-PK on a new project titled Supporting Democratic Electoral Process (SDEP). After a year long association with this project, an evaluation raised conclusions that the many of the trained workers were insecure about taking these issues back to their communities for fear of reprisal and also the insecurity of being ill-equipped to tackle issues raised by the community itself. Evidently the nature of theatre in the development process lent its perks and among the issues raised by the trained groups, one seems quite telling about the culture of the workshops offered:

³⁹¹ Salman Rashid, *A New Millenium 2000- 2002. The Story of Interactive Resource Centre Lahore*, Interactive Resource Centre. (date unknown), p.4

“Who will give us funds to replicate the same activity the way you did i.e. in luxury hotels with all the available facilities?”³⁹²

The insecurity voiced by the workers led Waseem towards the solution of offering interactive theatre methods to the trainees, as “through this medium (the) activists’ concerns of not knowing all the answers, or making the drastic faux pas and financial constraints that hamper dissemination could effectively be removed”³⁹³. Why the theatre groups needed funds and “luxury hotel accommodation” to be able to disseminate theatre on a grassroots level is a question that is not clearly answered. In any case, by 1999, Waseem was effectively introducing interactive theatre methods in his workshops with CWS partners in Sindh.

In 2000, a training programme for women with the legal aid NGO AGHS led in the culmination of a play, which was performed for an audience of 250 paralegal women and women’s rights activists. The performance is described in IRC’s biographical publication cited above as an “Oscar winner”, and the interactions contributed by the audience confirmed for Waseem the efficacy of interactive theatre as a medium for communication.

In the same year, a project on People’s Assemblies involving political debate at a mass level was led by a micro financing NGO Sungi Development Foundation and aided financially by the Asia Foundation in which interactive theatre became the tool for communication. By the end of the project Sungi had worked in 42 towns and cities across Pakistan and had held interactive theatre on relevant themes in seven centres. This was also the year when Waseem was provided funding from Asia Foundation and CWS to attend a two week training workshop with Augusto Boal in New York in the year 2000.

With increasing workload during his tenure at the CWS, the year 2000 also heralded another project on Democratic Rights and Citizens Education Programme (DRCEP), with funding by the Asia Foundation and partners in SAP-PK, Sungi, Pakistan Institute for Labour Education and Research (PILER), Institute for Development Studies and Practices (IDSP) and

³⁹² Khaliq, *ibid*, p.4

³⁹³ Rashid, *ibid*, p.7

Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI). In view of the new military government's initiative to introduce a system of governance in the country, the project aimed at informing the electorate of their responsibilities towards a just system and the creation of an environment that would encourage the integration of women, farmers and workers to contest reserved seats. It was clear to Waseem and the project partners that the projects needed to be managed through an independent organisation, and as a result, the Interactive Resource Centre was established as a registered NGO in November 2000. Aware of the fact that the IRC's funding with the Asia Foundation would end in nine months, Waseem's justified working for this military government initiated project because he considered there to be a greater opportunity to explore theatre at a wider level. While friends and partners were wary of working for local governance in support of a military dictatorship, and accused Waseem of opportunism, his options were clear. "If it had to be a military dictator taking a step forward, IRC opted to stand by him". A series of theatre workshops was initiated in all four provinces of the country in two phases, spread over roughly a year. IRC's strategy was based upon conducting workshops in different areas preceding local body elections to prepare politicians as well as the electorate for the elections. The projects results had caught attention in the development circles, and the Asia Foundation resumed its financial support for IRC for an additional nine months. The course of events since its establishment have seen the IRC in partnership with various NGOs and funding organisations like the Aga Khan University, Heinrich Boll, Action Aid, CIDA, Pakistan Poverty Alleviation Fund (PPAF) and the European Union.³⁹⁴

The IRC has formed approximately 80 theatre groups in 88 districts of Pakistan. At present there are some 800 theatre activists trained by the IRC. Aiming exclusively now to train theatre groups in interactive theatre and advocacy skills, the IRC also hosts a media unit that produces documentaries and profiles of other organisations. As part of its activities, the IRC has been conducting annual Interactive Theatre Festivals inviting many of its trained groups to perform and share their experiences.³⁹⁵

³⁹⁴ Rashid, , *ibid*, pp.1-27

³⁹⁵ Khaliq, *ibid*, pp.6-7

IRC – Ideology and Methodology

It is evident through the description of his career that Waseem made conscious choices to pursue theatre options that offered him financial stability. The development world offered him just that compared to the voluntary nature of work with *Ajoka* and *Lok Rehas*. The catalogues documenting IRC's work display a self-celebratory style of writing, where Waseem is constantly referred to as "our man" (...our man offered his services as a trainer to ...SAP-PK and CWS), (...our man flew out to meet his guru for the first time")³⁹⁶ and the success of his plays is measured as "Oscar winners".

IRC's mission statement advocates non-violent and political solutions of conflicts, and influencing mainstream change to achieve transformation. It aims to develop innovative techniques in interactive communication to increase the effectiveness of the social process of change and build the capacities of communities to extend advocacy in human rights, democratic governance, peace and justice.³⁹⁷

The IRC is described by Mohammed Waseem as a Resource group, with an aim to train those organisations that are already involved in outreach through advocacy, so that they are self sufficient in handling their own issues. Waseem makes it very clear that his organisation does not work with individuals. He advocates working with NGOs or organisations that are already dealing with specific issues in their constituencies and the IRC steps into train members of these organisations in the Interactive Theatre methodology that is then taken back to the communities by the trained members. He also reveals that now after being established for six years (at the time of this interview) the IRC is selective about which groups it wishes to train because he feels that many groups are "unable to do this work." He makes decisions based on an assessment of how serious the group is and how able it is to incorporate theatre-training methods in its work. The IRC rejects about 50 to 60 applications for every workshop, and these seem to be largely newly established groups that have not proved their sustenance in their careers. Waseem feels that if a group is unable to survive itself through the interactive theatre training, it is also likely that it will misunderstand the concept and vulgarise it in its practice. As a

³⁹⁶ Rashid, *ibid*, p.4 and p.11

³⁹⁷ Khaliq, *ibid*, p.1

result he advocates training groups from organisations that have reached a secondary stage in their practice and can sustain the methods his organisation extends training for. This practice of consultancy contributes to 40% of IRC's finances. There is no reservation in acknowledging the high costs of the training programme. "I think we are the most expensive trainers in Pakistan [.] (We inform them of) the costs, this is the hostel, these are the facilities, if you don't want them, that's fine by us". Additionally now that the IRC is out of its own survival process, it has the choice to refuse projects that it feels will not have any effect or bear any meaning.³⁹⁸ The cost for a ten-day workshop conducted by two IRC trainers is a flat fee of Rs 100,000/- (about £704.00 at the current exchange rate, 30 Sept 2008). If a group invites the trainers to its constituency, it must pay additionally for the airfare of the trainers and cover the costs for their accommodation and living expenses. If a group wishes to train at the IRC centre in Lahore, it must arrange for its own airfares, accommodation and living expenses. A ten-day workshop comprises of eight days of training and two days dedicated to rehearsals specific to the play the group will have prepared during the workshop. The ten-day workshop training aims to produce a play that will be performed on the tenth day.

For its financial sustenance, apart from the consultancy work, IRC is a resource organisation for OXFAM, for which it conducted a campaign on honour killings. In the mid term review of the project, OXFAM representatives from the UK impressed by the outcomes, extended the association for the next three years. The main funding organisations that sustain its expenses are the US based NED and (National Endowment For Democracy) and FGHR (Fund for Global Human Rights). These organisations contribute core funds towards the administrative expenditures of IRC.³⁹⁹ The 2007 grants offered by the NED to the IRC amount to \$ 75,000 USD, and aim towards IRC's training of "urban youth and other groups on community-based documentary filmmaking and on the use of interactive theatre".⁴⁰⁰ Other organisations that IRC mentions as its partners on its website are Action Aid Pakistan, CIDA (Canadian International Development Agency), CIDA-PIF (CIDA-Punjab Initiative Fund) for a local government project on water and sanitation, CRS (Catholic Relief Services), CWS (Church

³⁹⁸ Interview Mohammed Waseem, Founder IRC, 21 December 2006

³⁹⁹ Interview Alvina Gladius, member IRC, 21 December 2006

⁴⁰⁰ National Endowment for Democracy, available at <http://www.ned.org/grants/07programs/grants-asia07.html#pakistan> accessed 26 September 2008

World Service), DFID-GEP (DFID - Gender Equity Project), European Union, SC-UK (Save The Children UK) on a Peshawar based project to eliminate child labour through education, Trocaire, an Irish organisation supporting IRC on a bonded labour project⁴⁰¹, The Asia Foundation and United States Institute of Peace.⁴⁰² Under the main funds contributed by NED and FGHR, IRC trains local groups in six targeted districts, through theatre and media. The latter training involves equipping the groups with cameras and skills to create documentaries based on their issues.⁴⁰³ With funding and support of this magnitude from large donor organisations, it is no surprise that Waseem is able to evaluate the success of IRC through numbers. “In the last 5 or 6 years, we have created more than 90 groups throughout Pakistan, have held about 5000 performances in 13 languages and developed about 150 scripts”.⁴⁰⁴

Keeping its practice solely focussed on the training of a specialised skill, IRC does not interact at any level with a community. It trains members of an organisation to work in interactive theatre methods on issues that the organisation wishes to raise. Research on the subject is entirely reliant on the knowledge that the organisation offers. “We don’t have a research cell. When we work with organisations, a lot of the work is done by them already.” Hence a project on bonded labour is informed by the research carried out by the relevant organisations such as the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, or PILER (Pakistan Institute of Labour Education AND Research).⁴⁰⁵ As far as the communities are concerned, one way to reconnect with them comes in the form of an annual interactive theatre festival.

“We don’t work directly with communities. We work with organisations that have roots in their communities. We train them on interactive theatre skills or media skills and because they are from the communities, they know their needs and issues, they know what matters to them, what matters more. And they know their language as well, their folk music, their artistry. They

⁴⁰¹ Project details – Interview Gladius, ibid

⁴⁰² IRC Partners, available at http://irc.org.pk/portal/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=20&Itemid=33 accessed 26 September 2008

⁴⁰³ Interview, Gladius, ibid

⁴⁰⁴ Interview Mohammed Waseem, ibid

⁴⁰⁵ ibid

are their community. So we train them and then they go back to their community and perform with them and try to change the situation". ⁴⁰⁶

IRC is, however, proud of the work of its more successful trained groups, one of them the micro-credit organisation *Kashf*, which was convinced to adopt interactive theatre methods in its practice by IRC. *Kashf's* theatre group's main advantage according to Waseem is its client number; a strong 100,000 community members. This already confirms the success of its outreach. In its theatre practices *Kashf's* theatre group has performed both interactive theatre as well as proscenium performances. The generous funds *Kashf* assigns to theatre each year, a sum of Rs 500,000 enables them to pay its actors a regular stipend and conduct roughly 400 performances each year. While Waseem feels that once trained *Kashf's* theatre group does not need his services anymore, he measures his success by the number of performances they and other similar theatre groups conduct each year. He assesses that there are at least 10 such theatre groups that are able to work independently through their own resources and are conducting about 50 performances each year. "Ten groups conducting 500 performances (put together), plus the other 100, 200 odd performances". ⁴⁰⁷

The other aspect of IRC's training is aimed towards media skills. Tapping into the digital media has opened another channel of outreach for IRC. Recordings of their plays are transmitted on local cable TV networks for maximum outreach. After setting up a media unit, IRC identified theatre groups that were conducting about 50 performances a year and equipped them with cameras and training to create documentaries. Some of these were posted on the BBC Urdu website and recommended for telecast on Channel 4. A fully equipped editing suite now lodged in the IRC premises serves as a centre for training as well as the making of IRC's own documentaries. The studio is also lent out to private TV channels, generating added income for the organisation. IRC's outreach ranges from media exchange projects between schools in Pakistan and the UK, as well as building a repertoire of community based films. A project on local government accountability yielded a film on the subject which was screened for a community of 2000 people. While Waseem identifies human rights and religious issues as the

⁴⁰⁶ Interview Gladius, ibid

⁴⁰⁷ Interview Mohammed Waseem, ibid

core issues IRC deals with, the range of subjects his organisation covers through various donor organisations' needs makes the result more gratifying because "we are educating a large number of people". The emphasis on funded projects does not mean that the IRC does not conduct voluntary projects, and dedicates roughly 30% of its time on projects on a voluntary basis. Currently the IRC consists of 4 trainers on the payroll as well as a staff of 20 to 25 workers.⁴⁰⁸

IRC plays – narratives

In a project titled *Attitudinal Transformation and Women's Empowerment* supported by DFID UK's Gender Equality Project, the IRC initiated the project with four partner organisations from Pakistan in 2004. The discussion on the play and the interactions is based on a book published by the IRC to support the project.⁴⁰⁹ Based on the real life stories of four women and extracted from the GEP's gender network, the four plays prepared by the theatre groups of the four partner organisations resulted in 15 performances in local languages as well as in Urdu. The play I will discuss below was prepared and performed by the *Sangtani* Women Rural Development Organisation's theatre group, the *Sangtani* Theatre Group from the Rajanpur District.

The Story of Kalsoom – Narrative

The story begins with the 22-year-old schoolteacher Kalsoom telling the audience that her decision to marry a man of her own choice outside the community has raised strong objections in the family. Her father is severely resistant to the idea and threatens to keep her under lock and key until she is married to the man of his choice. Support comes in the form of Kalsoom's suitor Zahid, a schoolteacher, who pledges to look after her if she agrees to leave her house and marry him. The marriage is met with reservations in his own family as his father and brother resent Zahid's decision to legally name his property and all the jewellery to Kalsoom. The only support Kalsoom gets at her in laws is from Zahid's sister, but she is not able to support the couple when her family threatens Zahid with violence. Fearing for her husband's

⁴⁰⁸ *ibid*

⁴⁰⁹ Nadia Anwer and Mustafa Nazir Ahmad, (translators) "*Journey Through the Lives of Courageous Women*", Interactive Resource Centre Lahore, 2004, p.6

life, Kalsoom hands over her property papers and jewellery to her in laws, and continues to live in the household. With their reduced finances, Kalsoom tries to teach in the local school but is met with resistance from the community. She resorts to giving private lessons in teaching the Quran as well as vocational classes to young girls to support her husband. Time moves on, and she has four children. Her eldest daughter Narjis announces that she has stood first in her school in the Matriculation exams and Kalsoom decides that she must now go to college. This decision is met with resistance by her husband and the play ends at the moment of conflict when Zahid beats her and threatens to throw her out of the house. The daughter, fearful for her mother's safety succumbs to the decision.

Interactions

Interactions in IRC's plays are found in the most concrete form in the publication discussed above, and in some recordings of plays that have been produced by the IRC. The latter do not specifically show all interventions, and I discuss the following through information presented through both sources. I find that the interventions do not necessarily present solutions, and that there are only a few examples to prove that a wide variety of solutions were tried out as interventions, rather than discussions. In the published account, some documentation shows that none of the interventions are acted out on stage but rather take the form of a debate that is conducted by the Joker and the various spect-actresses who engage with the play. Some of the interactions are more successful in that the audience members actually put themselves in the place of an actor and experience the situation themselves. The following text is reproduced from the documentation of the first interaction in the story of Kalsoom.

(Joker enters clapping)

Joker: Kalsoom has made the decision that she won't send her daughter to college. Is she right?

Spect-Actress 1: No.

Joker: Has she made the right decision?

Spect-Actress 2: No.

Joker: What should she do then?

Spect-Actress 3: She should allow her daughter to study.

Joker: So you want Kalsoom to allow her daughter to study. Why don't you come on stage and do it yourself?

(Spect-Actress 3 comes onto the stage and takes the role of Kalsoom)

Kalsoom: My daughter will study, come what may. I would rather leave your house than deprive my daughter of education.

Zahid: If this is your decision, then get out of my house!

(Spect-Actress 3 starts going back, but the joker stops her).

Joker: Should she leave the house?

Spect-Actress 4: No.

Joker: *(to Kalsoom)* would you go alone or take your daughter with you?

Kalsoom: I'll take my daughter with me.

Joker: Is it possible in our society for a woman to leave the house only because her husband doesn't allow their daughter to study in college?

Spect-Actress 5: Not at all.

Joker: Where would she live?

Spect-Actress 6: She shouldn't leave her house.

Joker: Even at the cost of her daughter's education?

Spect-Actress 6: Yes, even at the cost of her daughter's education.

Joker: This is what you say, but most of us are in favour of her daughter's education. *(To Kalsoom)* You've decided to leave the house, but where would you go?

Kalsoom: Wherever I may go, my daughter shall study further.

Joker: But our society won't allow you to do this.

Kalsoom: I don't give a damn.

Joker: Now we ask Zahid what he will do if his wife and daughter decide to leave the house.

Zahid: I would let my wife go, but not my daughter.

Joker: But she is going with her mother.

Zahid: I'll stop her.

Joker: How? She has already left? *(Silence)*

Joker: *(pointing at Zahid)* Look! He has no answer!

(Clapping from the audience)

Joker: *(to spect-actress)* Thank you!

This is followed by more interventions that follow the same pattern. Six more spect - actresses follow suite, offering solutions that range from allowing the daughter to study privately, to demanding a college in the village, involving the community elders in the debate, and finally convincing the husband to agree with Kalsoom. Each suggested is argued down by the Joker: private schooling is not possible because there is no tutor in the village educated enough to teach at college level, a village college would be the government's job not theirs, and the community elders would never agree to the discussion. The argument for convincing the husband is presented to the Joker instead of trying it as an interaction with the husband's character.

Joker: But how? Please tell us! Is there a college in the village? Are girls allowed to study?

Spect-Actress 12: Yes, girls are allowed to study.

Spect-Actress 9: These days they are allowed to study, especially in educated families.

Joker: It's great that they are allowed to do so. Do you want to say anything else that has not been said by anyone?

(Silence)

Joker: The play staged here is not fiction. It's a true story of a woman who actually went through all this and made her decisions in life. This story doesn't end here, but continues further. The woman is still alive and has respect in the society. In the end I thank you all for being here to watch this play.⁴¹⁰

The inconclusiveness reached through this method is evident from the above interventions. By the word "inconclusive" I do not mean that each intervention should yield a result for a spect-actor, but rather that he is given a chance to experience the attempt to change a situation. While Forum Theatre does not advocate results, it certainly demands a space which allows a spectator to become part of the action onstage and investigate, whether his solutions are viable or not. Unlike the young man in the fish meal factory described in Boal's example of Forum Theatre, who wanted to throw a bomb at the factory to end his woes, but found that he could not implement his plan, the spect-actresses of Kalsoom's story advocated their ideas only through discussion.

"The participants who choose to intervene must continue the physical actions of the replaced actors; they are not allowed to come on stage and talk talk talk: they must carry out the same type of work or activities performed by the actors who were in their place. The theatrical activity must go on in the same way, on the stage. Anyone may propose any solution but it must be done on stage, working acting, doing things, and not from the comfort of his seat. Often a person is very revolutionary when in a public forum he envisages and advocates revolutionary and heroic acts: on the other hand, he often realises that things are not so easy when he himself has to practice what he suggests".⁴¹¹

The Joker's dominance over the discussion is evident in his arguments for every suggestion, which he does not facilitate in the form of an intervention. His berating Zahid (Look! He has no answer!) is nothing more than a theatrical gimmick, and far from the ideologies advocated by Boal.

⁴¹⁰ Nadia Anwer and Mustafa Nazir Ahmad, *ibid*, pp.21-35

⁴¹¹ Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, *ibid*, p.139

To be fair to IRC's process, there are also some interactions in other plays that move beyond the discussion phase. Some examples from another narrative of this project reveal efforts to engage with the action.

The Story of Najma – Narrative

This narrative begins with Najma when she is the eighth grade. She has one elder brother who is mentally challenged, and two younger brothers both in school. Her father Akram is a drug addict and most of the household expenses are run by the mother Khalida and Najma by selling handicrafts. Najma negotiates household chores, school and the craft making to assist her mother. Both Najma and Khalida are perturbed that Akram has taken to drugs again despite his promises to quit. They also find out that he has been involved in selling drugs. On the day he renews his pledge to quit, he is arrested and jailed. In the two years that he spends in jail, the two women support the household financially and Najma completes her Matriculation exam with good results. She is keen to go to college. Her father is released from jail at this point and on his return finds new plans for Najma's education in the offing. Akram is strongly resistant to the idea and Najma protests by going on a hunger strike for four days until her worsening condition makes Akram concede to the decision upon condition that she fend for herself financially to pay her fees. Help comes in the form of a friend who lends her money to go through her education. This along with selling handicrafts and offering tuition to the village children sustain Najma through her education till the Intermediate level. Good results in the exams yield a job offer to teach in the local school but Najma aspires for something more. She applies for work in an office and is accepted. While the school teaching job presents some reservations on Akram's part, he accepts this because it is an all girls' school. But working in an office in the company of men is completely unacceptable for him. He blames Khalida for supporting Najma and allowing her to become so brazen. The play ends at the conflict situation when Akram is beats his wife for supporting their daughter, and Najma gives in by declaring that she will not go to work to save her mother from this brutality.

Several interactions take place for solutions to this issue. In the first one Spect-Actress 1 proposes that Najma confronts her father. When she enacts this on stage, she finds that she

loses her mother's support because she is being insolent towards her father. Spect-Actress 1 steps down.

The joker invites the audience to play the role of the mother, Khalida.

Joker: Would anyone suggest how Najma's mother should cope with this situation?

Spect-Actress 4: She should protest.

Joker: Please come on stage and tell us how.

(Spect-Actress 4 takes the role of Khalida in stage. The play begins from the last scene).

Khalida: My daughter shall definitely do a job. Otherwise you'll have to meet all the household expenses.

Akram: But I'm already doing my best.

Khalida: But you have never given us anything.

Akram: The society doesn't let me live in peace if I allow her to work.

Khalida: If the society doesn't let you live in peace, you may leave the house.

Joker: Can a wife dare ask her husband to leave the house?

Spect-Actress 5: No she can't.

Spect-Actress 6: One might have said this in desperation.

Joker: *(to Spect-Actress 4)* Thank you.

In another intervention, a spect-actress decides to leave the house and take her mother with her, but finds her mother resistant to the idea and sympathetic towards her husband. This receives a lot of applause from the audience. The joker questions the reasons which compel the audience to applaud at that point. One response is that it is probably because everyone wants Najma to convince her father rather than leave the house. The person suggesting this is asked to make the next intervention. Spect-Actress 5 playing Najma is reminded by Akram that a girl's place is in the home and that she must get married, but Najma proclaims that she will never get married. This too is met with applause.

Joker: What do we say about a girl who doesn't marry?

Spect-Actress 6: We doubt her character.

Joker: Character... although to marry or not is entirely her personal matter. Tell me, if a husband beats his wife, is it their personal matter or one of the society's?

Spect-Actress 5: It concerns the whole society.

Spect-Actress 7: It's their personal matter.

Joker: By saying that it is their personal matter, you are in a way giving licence to this man that he may beat his wife as much as he likes.

(To Spect-Actress 5) Thank you very much.

In another intervention, a spect-actress playing Najma suggests to her mother that she file for divorce. The mother's refusal is met with applause from the audience. When the joker questions whether a woman would agree to divorce her husband, one of the responses is that possibly the woman suggesting this was from an NGO.⁴¹²

The kind of separation between the community's concerns and those of people in the audience displayed in the last response was also evident at the end of one play on rape presented in IRC 5th theatre festival in November 2005. Presented in the auditorium of the National College of Arts, the play's audience mainly consisted of an educated elite. The play did not inspire any interventions from the audience despite repeated invitations from the Joker initially. Instead the participation came in the form of discussion that ranged from identifying problems in the political and social fabric of the society to reciting inspirational poetry. One female audience member separating herself from the issue and the protagonists suggested that if "*these people* want justice and ask for it, they won't get it. They must fight for it", a statement which was challenged immediately by the Joker. The discussion that ensued continued for 12 minutes (according to the DVD recording available) and may have been edited down. The duration of the play was 17 minutes.⁴¹³

IRC plays – styles

Most of the plays I have watched on DVDs provided by IRC display an underlying uniformity of style. This is probably because apart from the training to create plays that might be intervened with, the IRC also assists groups in the aesthetic production of the plays. Most plays have similar stylistic concerns, a matter which is inevitable as Waseem is the director for all the productions.

I discuss the stylistic concerns keeping two plays as case studies from IRC's repertoire. The first, from the GEP project is the *Story of Bilqees*, and the second, from the 5th Theatre of the Oppressed Festival, is *Education* performed by the *Murk Theatre Hyderabad*. (I have

⁴¹² Nadia Anwer and Mustafa Nazir Ahmad, *ibid*, pp.80-111

⁴¹³ DVD, *5th Theatre of the Oppressed Festival, 14- 16 November 2005, Screening of Video Documentaries*. Interactive Resource Centre, 2005

discussed this group's work in the previous chapter, in which I observed that *Murk's* plays were considered too abstract for *Aahung's* needs. The form displayed in the play discussed earlier now shows clearly the influence of IRC's training).

*The Story of Bilqees*⁴¹⁴ is the narrative of a woman who has support from her husband while he is alive, but has to fight for her property and rights with her in laws once he dies. She continues her struggle to educate her children, defies pressure from her brother in law to leave the house and ultimately contests for the local elections to become the councillor of her district. The play ends at a point in her life when she succumbs to the pressure and decides not contest elections or to demand a school in her area so that she may live peacefully in her house.

The story on *Education*⁴¹⁵ raises concerns around the bureaucracy that engulfs the education system and the lack of funds available for teachers to provide education or run their schools systematically. The play picks up three narratives, each told by a child, about the problems the school and students face. The play ends with all three children asking how their issues may be solved.

Both these plays and all the others I have seen begin with an introductory song drawn from the indigenous traditions of the regions they represent. The languages range from the provincial languages, dialects, to Urdu. The introductory song may or may not represent the narrative about to be presented. Songs also function as time-lapse devices or facilitate change in scenes or locales. These are usually sung by a group of musicians outside the action, and not visible on stage (as presented on the DVD), and are accompanied by minimal number of instruments and percussion. In the *Story of Bilqees*, the cast sings all the songs without the aid of any musical instruments. These intermediary songs are also drawn from folk songs and are often familiar to the ear.

⁴¹⁴ *The Story of Bilqees*, available at http://irc-net.tv/portal/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=42&Itemid=38, accessed 10 September 2008

⁴¹⁵ "*Education*", *Murk Theatre Group, 5th Theatre of the Oppressed Festival 14- 16 November 2005*, DVD, Interactive Resource Centre Lahore

Compositional formations are a very vital part of these plays. These may be in the form of movements across the performance area or freezes or still images (alluding to image theatre) that function as end points of stories or moments in plays. This is very strongly evident in *Education* when the play requires transitions from the story of one child to another. Each story is based in a classroom and we see three slightly variant formations of groupings on stage to suggest a classroom. As one narrative ends the event in the classroom is suggested through a still image, each depicting a problem. The images are used effectively after the first story as school representatives go to each house convincing the parents to send their children to school. The group takes advantage to a big cast (11 members) to create three groups of households, and after each set of dialogues, the group freezes to suggest rejection of the suggestion. Again the entire scene ends in the form of a still image and dissolves into the story of the next child. The second story ends with still images of children being punished in the classroom, and third ends with officials and teacher discussing their own issues while the children remain unattended. These images create a strong impact in the story and establish the mood of the situation quite succinctly. *Murk Theatre* also uses formations to suggest rural activities in the introduction song, and actors become animals, trees, birds, or election candidates as the song suggests. The energetic song also suggests children's games that build up and dissolve into the formation of the first classroom narrative. These stylistic concerns were also evident in *Murk Theatre's* play I discussed in the previous chapter, where the introductory song sung by a single actor was supported by still images of oppression.

Formations of a different nature, functioning more as compositional devices in the *Story of Bilqees* lend the play its stylistic uniformity. Here, all actors sit on the floor in a semi circle facing the audience. A narrator sings the introductory song as actors take their places in the semi circle. This remains more or less constant through the play and is broken only to reconfigure a scene or locale. Actors get up and sing together from this semi circle, return to it as silent observers until they are required to play their roles. Sometimes they contribute sounds, (baby crying) while in this formation, and largely hold the compositional structure of the play. This formation breaks to facilitate change in the play. The actors sing and dance in a circle to celebrate the wedding of Bilqees and the only transition that occurs from choral member to

protagonist is when the actor playing Bilqees steps out of the circle and re enters it with a change of costume (a different scarf placed near the back wall of the stage) to play Bilqees. Apart from the narrator, Bilqees also tells her story to the audience from the centre of the semi circle. This inner space then becomes the performance space and the semi circle forms its periphery. Another moment when the semi circle breaks is when the actors take their place behind Bilqees and form a procession that takes a circular movement around the stage when she is contesting for the elections. The semi circle also remains a constant device when another locale is being suggested simultaneously to Bilqees' home. While she sits in a freeze in the centre, three men stand up from the peripheral structure and speak as if she is not present. This simple device assists the play in avoiding complex compositions and is cleverly managed in the short 16-minute duration of the play.

The device of using still images is also evident very strongly in another play on Peace, relating the issue of Kashmir between India and Pakistan. Two groups are formed to suggest each country and several still images are created to suggest oppression, death and destruction through the play as it is interjected with dialogue.

Visual aesthetics are also attended to with deliberate attention to costumes. While these are not elaborate, they are visually uniform in colour, mostly white, with a colourful scarf for women and sashes for men. Both plays discussed above use white costumes, with accents of colour. The actors do not use props, and the stage is mostly decorated with banners or posters of the project being represented. The GEP play's presentation I have seen had its stage decorated with large silk-screened decorated images that did not necessarily seem connected to the narrative. *Murk Theatre's* play was presented at the National College of Arts Auditorium, with black flats and back walls on the stage, and one large festival poster displayed centrally on the back wall. Two colourfully embroidered panels on each side of performing space were propped to lend the otherwise bland space some colour but were not functional for this play. These were later used by another group in the same festival as props.

Another aspect that was evident in these and other plays was the inclusion of IRC members as actors in some of the plays, where Punjabi or a similar regional language was used. While these are described as joint productions, the inclusion of these members lends a certain strength to the plays that may not have been possible without them. *Murk Theatre* performs in the Sindhi language, and is self sufficient in its productions, but in both the *Story of Bilqees* and the play on *Peace*, members of IRC are part of the performance. This strategy may also have been used when the plays were being showcased for more formal events, as it is certainly not possible that the IRC members frequently accompany groups in their regions to perform the plays.

The question to be raised here then, is how self-sufficient are these groups without IRC's intervention in the production, be it in areas of performance or production? Once IRC helps them to prepare a play, how much are they able to create the next ones? I discussed a lack of continuity of style in *Murk Theatre's* play in the previous chapter. The initial part was prepared in workshops with IRC and borrowed from *Ajoka's* repertory, and the group was unable to maintain the continuity of the form in the second half of the play. Perhaps this reflects an answer to the question.

TfD - for whom?

In a paper that raises questions about the practice of Theatre for Development (TfD) in Bangladesh, Jamil Ahmed speaks about how NGOs, almost entirely funded by donor organisations, use TfD to serve globalisation and donors' agendas. Giving examples of two prominent Theatre for Development organisations in Bangladesh, Ahmed leads us through their practice to reveal how they undertake development projects through their theatre practice.⁴¹⁶ I find obvious similarities between the work of one of the groups *Proshika* and the IRC, both established as Theatre for Development organisations, with the aid of western donor agencies.

⁴¹⁶ Syed Jamil Ahmed, "Wishing for a World Without 'Theatre for Development': demystifying the case of Bangladesh", *Research in Drama Education*, Vol.7, No.2, Routledge Journals, Taylor and Francis, UK, 2002, pp.208

Proshika's working methods involve organising primary groups at village level, which undertake development projects such as employment, income generation, education, environment protection and housing. Under its People's Cultural Programme, *Proshika* organises People's Cultural Troupes at village level and these comprise of members who may have some experience in indigenous theatre, are musicians or have some experience with organising events. The process of devising plays takes 3 to 5 days and comprises of the following phases. An issue is selected by the village or union coordination committee or by the cultural troupe. The troupe members create a story based on the real life events with the assistance of *Proshika's* field workers. A story is devised and structured into a play format and troupe members engage in improvisations. Simultaneously the development worker sets about a process of analysis of the characters and their relationship to the power structure. In all performances, the performance begins with a rendition of songs, followed by the play. The plays address issues such as social injustice, dowry, illiteracy, gender discrimination to name a few. While *Proshika* claims that these issues are selected by the people themselves, the play making process shows a top down working process, as the issues are determined by the village coordination committee or by the troupes. Such working methods according to Ahmed leave little room for Freirean dialogue or Boal's Forum techniques, and while the selected issues may address important concerns, they are nevertheless those that attract foreign funding. In the work process it is also observed that the *Proshika* worker is closely involved in the procedure of play making and the training of the coordinator.⁴¹⁷

This all too familiar scenario is evident on the IRC's method of working. Its issues range within the periphery of the ones mentioned above, all issues that bear importance in the donor agenda. The funding provided by a plethora of Western donor agencies naturally approves of the issues that IRC focuses on in its quest to promote theatre in the development paradigm. The honour killings campaign with OXFAM, or the local government accountability campaign with CIDA-PIF, the child labour programme with SCF-UK are clear indicators of the options IRC chooses to undertake in its theatre programmes.

⁴¹⁷ Ahmed, *ibid*, pp.210-211

And while *Proshika*'s website boasts of its own success through numerical evaluations, (in a report dated the year 2000, 640 troupes made 12,656 performances in 1999- 2000), the IRC statistics mentioned earlier aspire to do the same. While *Proshika* provides infrastructure to the troupes in the form of theatre props or musical instruments, the IRC extends its support to groups that have proved their commitment in the form of media equipment and training. The use of indigenous cultural forms is also as important to *Proshika* as it is evident in IRC's agenda.⁴¹⁸

Proshika's claims of its plays creating an unprecedented level of awareness are reasoned on the basis that the "poor people can identify themselves with the stories drawn from their lives", and also because they are constructed in the local dialect, drawing performers from amongst themselves.⁴¹⁹ This bears a similar resonance in IRC's statement:

"No longer is a theme fed to the drama activists, instead they are asked to identify issues. Their issues, that they think warrant turning into a play".⁴²⁰

In the second group that Ahmed uses as a case study, the Bangladesh Institute of Theatre Arts, (BITA), the process of creating a play involves a lot of input from the BITA development worker. Whether it is the development of a script or the use of improvisations and rehearsals, the method reflects the methodology of mainstream practitioners. My earlier discussion on the formal aspects of the plays created under IRC supervision do seem to show similarities in Waseem's involvement in the process, lending the plays a uniformity of style.

And while IRC is dismissive of grassroots groups that may not display their seriousness because they have not proved their mettle, or because they have not surpassed their initial survival stages, Ahmed finds *Proshika*'s plays to be bereft of in-depth analysis of the complexities of life because according to the development worker, the "villagers would not

⁴¹⁸ Ahmed, *ibid*, p.210

⁴¹⁹ *ibid*, p.211

⁴²⁰ Rashid, *ibid*, p.18

understand it". This according to Ahmed may well be because the development worker may be unaware himself of the complexities.⁴²¹

The problem of development workers' inability to analyse can rise from the fact that they may be unaware of the philosophies and ideologies that underlie the TfD methodologies. In a paper that interrogates the practice and ethics of TfD in Kenya, and based on research conducted on 20 theatre companies, Christopher Odhiambo Joseph found that 70% of artists or practitioners were not aware of the philosophies or ideologies that informed their practice. As a result TfD was only a method to pass on messages by donors and NGOs to the communities.⁴²²

In identifying the issues with the two theatre groups, Ahmed does not aim to nullify their ideological commitment. I would agree with the same as far as IRC is concerned. The real problem lies in the co-option of the Freirean and Boalian methodologies to serve the purpose of the donors and their agendas. Ahmed purports that "dialogue" is converted to "opinion sharing" neutralising the matter at hand, and advocating a top-down dissemination, which domesticates the social structure rather than liberates it.⁴²³

In a response to Prentki's article "Save the Children? – Change the World" Jamil Ahmed argues that Prentki's argument for "real participation" as the qualifying factor towards "transforming communities into subjects rather than objects of their development", is in itself a contradiction. For in this statement Ahmed finds the presence of an "invisible Subject" who has taken on the role of transforming the communities into Subjects. Similar to the shift in the development paradigm from modernisation to participation, Prentki's suggestion of a shift in TfD with keywords like " issues, objectives, indicators, method, process and project" to "story, ownership, analysis, contradiction, dialectic and transformation", Prentki is himself accepting the fundamental premise of the development agencies that the inhabitants of the Third World

⁴²¹ Ahmed, *ibid*, p.212

⁴²² Christopher Odhiambo Joseph, "Theatre for Development in Kenya: interrogating the ethics of practice", *Research in Drama Education*, Vol.10, no.2, Routledge Journals, Taylor and Francis, UK, June 2005, pp.194-195

⁴²³ Ahmed, *ibid*, p.214

are under developed. Once this is accepted, the neoliberal culture Prentki speaks of has already set in because one is judging the “Other” according to the standards of development set by the “Developed” This according to Ahmed reveals evangelistic tendencies of transforming people of the Third World into subjects and contradicts Prentki’s intention by transforming the people into objects.⁴²⁴

In an article that discusses both Prentki’s above mentioned paper and Ahmed’s response to it, Sheila Preston observes that Ahmed raises important questions about the “agent” of development and the “missionary “ tendencies of those who seek to change the world, identifying the cultural subjectivity of intervention when it impacts itself in a complex mix of tradition and cultural difference. In identifying questions around the process of change, such as who the agents of change are in a transformative development intervention, what the role of the facilitator is, and how and where the change should occur, Preston observes that Ahmed reveals important issues around the process of change. In her defence of Prentki’s arguments, she argues that in creating situations that would enable subjects to become their own agents of change, change is ineffective if it is defined by an outsider. However, given the importance of dialogue in the process of change, the outsider may become a catalyst for dialogue and can encourage it through theatre. This said however Preston argues that in the debate on agency and change, questions on where change is best initiated are vital. She concludes that change needs to occur at all levels and sections of society and one must not make the assumption that a community defined as oppressed cannot make their own changes. The emphasis Preston’s article makes is that whatever work is done towards transformation, the clearly necessary intention of the pursuit of praxis must encompass a critical, self-reflexive and political engagement with the all contradictions that may follow.⁴²⁵

⁴²⁴ Jamil Ahmed, “When theatre practitioners attempt changing an ever-changing world: a response to Tim Prentki’s ‘Save the children? - Change the world’, *Research In Drama Education*, Vol. 8, No. 1,” *Research In Drama Education*, Vol. 9, No.1, Routledge Journals, Taylor and Francis, UK, March 2004, pp.97-98

⁴²⁵ Sheila Preston, “An argument for transformative theatre in development: continuing the debate (see Ahmed, 2002, 2004; Prentki 2003”, *Research in Drama Education*, Vol.9, No.2, Routledge, Taylor and Francis, UK, September 2004, pp.229-234

This critical engagement is what we often find missing in the use of theatre in the development paradigm. The issues of ethics in the practice of TfD in Kenya highlighted by Joseph are a vital example of the ideology co-opted by development as Ahmed explains earlier. The post 1990 boom in Theatre for Development in Kenya and the realisation by NGOs that TfD was indeed a vital form for awareness raising brought about its own set of problems regarding ethics in the practice. Joseph cites Lenin Ogolla, a prominent TfD practitioner in Kenya who laments that development workers have little expertise in TfD and become susceptible to people who claim expert knowledge in the field. While community theatre is not something every actor or director can handle, the emphasis on civic education by the donor agencies and NGOs has seen a quick rise in opportunities to take to TfD, turning it into an industry. Given the opportunities available, Joseph found in his survey that 90% of the practitioners of TfD had opted for this form of work because it was a good source of income, and were earning money by pursuing issues that were high on the donors' lists. Since the practitioners go into TfD for economic reasons, they advocate the agendas of the NGOs with little analysis and thought. Other statistics revealed that 60% of TfD practitioners had no training at all in TfD and 40 % had some exposure through seminars and workshops. Joseph concludes with an emphasis on the need for NGOs that use TfD to be educated in the ideologies and principals that define it, thereby advocating the same critical engagement that Preston speaks of.⁴²⁶

William Fisher states that funding of northern and southern NGOs has increased so much that it is rare to find an NGO that is not dependent on official aid. This dependency and the vulnerability of their positions can easily make an NGO less willing to counter the positions advocated by the agencies that fund them. This co-option of NGOs by development agencies is so advanced that NGOs are being destined to become the "organisational mechanism for an international welfare system". Fisher also identifies NGOs as being susceptible to the dangers that befall other institutions, such as routinisation and the gradual conversion from democratic to oligarchic rule. This shift from participatory to oligarchic political structures raises important questions in the minds of those who wish to identify transformative possibilities in NGOs;

⁴²⁶ Joseph, *ibid*, pp.191-198

questions such as, will NGOs repeat the patterns of the societies that they emerge from and can they empower without simultaneously victimising?⁴²⁷

In Ahmed's paper on TfD in Bangladesh, he observes that all NGO sponsored TfD groups depend on international development agencies to sustain their work. As a result the agendas are determined by the NGOs and not by the people. This is also evident in the case of IRC where a range of "burning" issues are supported by donor funds. Hence according to Ahmed, whatever the mission of the NGOs, they ultimately are geared towards fulfilling the donor agendas. On a globalised level, he purports that the donor agendas are determined by the interest of the multi national capital, thus making development an industry that serves the needs of globalisation. In examining the various layers that construct the strategies of development and Theatre for Development, he asks the crucial question – " Development for whom?"⁴²⁸

Given that most theories that influence the work of the theatre groups discussed so far have been influenced by western liberal thought, I now turn my attention in the following chapter to arguments that discuss alternate notions of agency, with a view to emphasis the need to examine practices beyond the dominant form of discourse.

⁴²⁷ William F. Fisher, "Doing Good? The Politics and Antipolitics of NGO Practices" *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 26, Annual Reviews, California, 1997, pp. 453-456

⁴²⁸ Syed Jamil Ahmed, "Wishing for a World Without 'Theatre for Development': demystifying the case of Bangladesh", *ibid*, p.215

CHAPTER 7

Examining Notions of Agency

Western liberal thought has influenced theories around Development where the construction of a disciplined self-regularised individual is considered necessary for the globalised model of the western world. Traditional practices are sacrificed to make way for the construction of selfhood that finds its roots in western ideology. In examining this concept through referencing particular research projects conducted in Egypt, (the family planning programme and the mosque movement), I draw attention to such practices, and also to particular notions of agency that are formed in western liberal thought and remain unchallenged. Given that both strains of theatre practice I discuss, the political as well as development based, find their roots in western ideology, I make connections to their practice through these observations as well as raise the need for examining other notions of selfhood that may not be rooted in western thought constructions. I have highlighted the problematics of extracting Boal's theories out of their original context to serve a western and globalised agenda in the earlier chapters. Through Saba Mahmood's discussion on alternative notions of agency, I discuss the need for a re evaluation to renew the practices of the political theatre groups by thinking beyond the dominant discourse and highlight the perils at hand if the work takes on an increasingly reductionist view of traditions practiced without engaging with the forms of life that they are embedded in.

When Jamil Ahmed speaks of the presence of an “invisible subject” in his critique of Prentki’s paper, he speaks of the presence of an outsider force taking on the role of transforming communities into subjects. There is a separation of those who are “Developed” and those who fit into the slot of the “Other”, as determined by the development paradigm. This concept comes under discussion in other debates about how development initiatives in general take initiatives to produce new bodies and selves in the wider context of capital expansion and accumulation in the twenty first century. Kamran Asdar in his research on family planning initiatives in Egypt speaks about such initiatives that help to construct a new kind of individuality and personal independence, whereby Development projects are geared towards the changing of traditional practices of people in the developing world to help them make the transition from their lifestyles to that of the globalising model of the western world.⁴²⁹

I draw in these arguments here in the context of the theatre groups discussed so far with a view to examine alternate ways of understanding the notion of agency, selfhood and empowerment than the ones that emerge from the western liberal models referenced in their practice. Boal’s theories may have emerged in Latin America but their adoption by western development agencies in the servicing of overtly pedagogical development agendas, already changes the context in which they were conceived. Brecht’s theories still remain dominant in the work of *Tehrik e Niswan* and *Ajoka* as exponents of his style and content. Notwithstanding that Brecht’s work developed in a very particular historical and political context, I do not criticise the attachment of these theatre groups to his theories. Certainly they are relevant even today as a means to inspiring thought-provoking theatre. What I argue for however is the need to examine alternative ways of perceiving notions of agency and selfhood, that are not necessarily connected to western liberal thought processes, and which might lead to culturally or socially specific ways to express agency. The canonical status Boal’s work receives, and its extraction from its original context towards a method that is pedagogical in nature, the implementation of his techniques through fast-paced programmes generated by the IRC and the problematics of such an approach have been discussed earlier. *Tehrik e Niswan*’s and *Ajoka*’s connection with Brecht through the themes portrayed in his plays is a means to reinforce their political

⁴²⁹ Kamran Asdar Ali, *Planning the Family in Egypt. New Bodies, New Selves*. University of Texas Press, Austin, 2002, pp.1 and 169

commitment because the issues can still be perceived as valid in Pakistan's current political climate. Brecht addressed class struggle, the exploitation of the poor at the hands of the privileged and constructed his plays as a means to break the illusion of reality to encourage the transformation of the socio economic realities of the oppressed through critical thinking. He contrasts Shen Te's altruism with Shui Ta's capitalist ethos of exploitation in *The Good Person of Szechwan*, shows the exploitation of the beggars at the hands of powerful individuals in *The Threepenny Opera*, speaks of the importance of the collective as opposed to the individual through Galy Gay's subjugation of the individual identity to that of the collective in *Man is Man* and highlights corruption and the manipulability of men in "*The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*". *Tehrik e Niswan's* and *Ajoka's* commitment to raising a voice against the exploitation of the poor, of speaking of corruption within the political fabric and of fighting for the rights of women as integral members of the social fabric, make Brecht's themes relevant and a viable means to communicate aspects of injustice and inequality, and create platforms for critical thought in the context of Pakistani society today.

Certainly the groups argue that the scripts are made culturally specific by localised references. But my arguments go beyond this level of cultural specificity. I argue for a more nuanced understanding of selfhood that may emerge through a culturally specific understanding to infuse their ideologies with more meaning and to lend the work of these theatre groups more significance than the aggression of overtly political work.

The Construction of the Self in Western Liberal Thought

In speaking of the family planning initiatives funded by the structural adjustment policies in Egypt, Kamran Asdar Ali speaks of globalisation practices that entail what he refers to as the "ideology of consumption", with an aim to create new wants and desires linked to the notions of individuality. Through development initiatives that service globalisation, a new more compliant citizenry is furnished, and introduced to ideas of self-regulation. The notion of the self-regulating individual is all-important in the liberal political thought. In order to create these, individuals have to be linked in social institutions, (such as education) in order to create the self-understanding individual. In this perspective, individuality is arrived at (rather than a given) through a

constructive agenda. The idea of creating a normalised individual self was evident in 19th century Britain when methods to reform the poor through education and tutelage by reformers were combined with knowledge about the lower classes by government bureaucrats to create interventions that would inculcate a disciplined individualism that would help people to express their freedom voluntarily and in compliance with the law. Outside of Europe the colonial practice also involved the reshaping indigenous beliefs and practices. More so, historians of the post colonial era have argued that in the two hundred years, Europe has been the silent referent to all histories, including those that are non western. Asdar Ali argues that in post-colonial Egypt society was reordered through the introduction of ideas of justice and equality that were backed by the political ideology of western liberalism. Today, non-western states such as Egypt aspire to integrate into the global market and do so by regulating the lives of their populations, aided by the development agendas of western donor agencies. Since Development in the post colonial era is modelled on the histories of the western states, it becomes a representation of modernity for those third world states that aspire to advance and progress. In the twentieth century, as development initiatives got linked to economic globalisation, this justified the power of capitalism and modern states became linked to the notion of progress. In such a scenario, the state propagates a language of freedom and choice, but also controls the parameters in which these choices may be made. In the case of Health for example, this becomes a civic responsibility and public health campaigns seek irresponsible social groups that adversely affect the economy. Countries such as Egypt emulate the western institutions that are important for the exercise of such regulatory powers. In the context of Asdar Ali's research the family planning program in Egypt serves as an example of the international development programs that aim to construct modern subjectivities as part of a process of creating socially controlling institutions. The Egyptian family planning program therefore seeks to persuade women to shed their ideas about the self and instead aims to construct the modern individual that is associated with new notions of rights in a new order of morality. Such interventions are of course contested given the socio political conditions of the country and these processes of managing populations then certainly become connected to the responses of the people themselves to the development agenda. So while the state seeks to change the behaviour of its population and construct self-regulating individuals through the developing agenda, the people constitute their

selves in diverse forms. The people transform the meanings of these development initiatives while not completely complying with the homogenous models that are assumed by the West. The state seeks those who adhere to other notions of the self or community and do not comply with these models of new social categories and aims to educate them out of their beliefs so that they can participate in the larger picture of progress and modernity. Such contestations that challenge the state's desire to subjugate and "civilise" are a means to identify different ways to be human.⁴³⁰

Domination, Resistance and the Construction of Agency

Western liberal thought processes have also informed the notion of selfhood and agency in feminist debates. One of the most likely issues to come under discussion has been the relationship between feminism and religious traditions, especially with reference to Islam. In the context of studying women's participation in piety movements particular to the Mosque Movement in Egypt, Saba Mahmood draws attention to the challenges that western notions towards agency face in the wake of burgeoning participation of women in this movement. Underlying the active participation of women in support of the Islamist movement is the question as to why women would agree to support a movement that is intrinsically against their own interests, especially when there are emancipatory possibilities available to them in the current times. What Mahmood questions however is the validity of such an assumption and the history of the thought process that has led theorists to think in this manner. The mosque movement in Egypt emerged as part of a larger Islamic revivalist movement in response to the perception that religious knowledge had become increasingly marginalized with the secularisation and westernisation of Egyptian society. The women's mosque movement therefore seeks to educate ordinary Muslims in the performance of religious duties and acts of worship, as well as daily conduct in accordance to the laws of Islamic piety. Not bereft of politics, this movement has influenced transformations in Egyptian society regarding dress codes, styles of speech, standards regarding finances, education, entertainment and generally all aspects of living.⁴³¹

⁴³⁰ Asdar Ali, *ibid*, pp. 4-15

⁴³¹ Saba Mahmood, *ibid*, pp.1-4

Movements such as the Mosque Movement have been perceived by secular scholars with associations such as subjugation of women, fundamentalism and conservatism. Mahmood's research examines how the notion of agency in feminist scholarship influences the study of women in patriarchal traditions such as Islam and aims to understand the concept of agency that lies beneath non liberal movements. What Mahmood asserts is that the notion of human agency in feminist scholarship, which locates the moral and political autonomy of the subject in the face of power, limits our ability to understand the lives of women whose desires and will have been shaped by non liberal traditions. For Mahmood, agency is not the resistance to domination but rather a capacity for action that has been constructed by historically specific relations of subordination.⁴³²

There has been scholarship since the 70's whereby feminist studies have examined how women have practiced agency within structures of subordination and subverted the hegemony of cultural practices by re inventing them for their own agendas. This scholarship contributed towards changing the simplistic approach to gender in non-western societies by looking beyond the connections drawn between submission and patriarchy. Jane Boddy's research of a women's healing cult (*zar*) in Northern Sudan, which uses Islamic idioms in a society that is largely dominated by men, shows that the *zar* serves as a counter hegemonic process and in the use of what the west would assume as "instruments of oppression", women assert their value collectively or individually – through the ceremonies they organise or the choices they make about marriage. These practices can be read as resistance to domination. Mahmood points out the problematics of studies where even though explicit feminist agency is difficult to locate, scholars tend to look for moments of resistance that suggest a challenge to male domination. Agency in such an analysis becomes the capacity to realise one's own interests against the burden of traditions and customs. Lila Abu-Lughod also questions how one might recognise women's resistance without attributing forms of consciousness to them that are not even part of their experiences. Abu-Lughod suggests that the idea of resistance be used instead as a means to diagnose power, a means to identify the shifts in social relations of power

⁴³² Saba Mahmood, "Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival" *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 16 (2), Blackwell Publishing, Oxford UK and Malden MA USA on behalf of American Anthropological Association, Arlington, May 2001, p.203

that influence both the resisters as well as those who dominate. She suggests that in order to describe the forms that acts of resistance take they must be located within the fields of power rather than outside of them. To follow this argument, Mahmood asks whether it is even possible to identify a universal category of acts of resistance outside the conditions within which they acquire meaning.⁴³³

Abu-Lughod reiterates her argument through Foucault's assertion, "where there is power, there is resistance" that suggests that resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relationship to power. With the view that all forms of resistance tell us about all forms of power, Abu Lughod's study of the Awlad Ali Bedouins of Egypt's western desert enable us to see how power relations are transformed. In examining resistances enacted by women in the Bedouin community in a sexually segregated lifestyle, Abu-Lughod finds that these forms of resistance show the ways that power is enacted through a range of prohibitions enforced upon them by men, and show forms of resistance in the way women fiercely protect the inviolability of their segregated space where the defiances take place. Whether it is through a network of support amongst women that enable them to make choices about their marriages that may otherwise be imposed by the men, or by songs about their aspirations to marry men of their choice, or ridiculing men and their masculinity through popular jokes, or expressing sentiments of vulnerability or love through poetry, these subversive discourses indicate that sexual difference is itself a form of power. Referring to Foucault's concept that power is not something that works negatively by denying and repressing, but also something that works positively by producing forms of pleasure, systems of knowledge or discourse, the social domination in the lives of the Bedouin women also works at constructing, and giving meaning to personal emotions.⁴³⁴

With the incorporation of local communities into modern states and the wider economy and the change in the lifestyles of the Bedouins to a more sedentary one, new forms of resistance occurred which also served as an index to understand the shifts in the methods of power. With the shift of the community to more settled neighbourhoods came more restrictions

⁴³³ Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, *ibid*, pp. 6-9

⁴³⁴ Lila Abu-Lughod, "The Romance of Resistance: Transformations of Power Through Bedouin Women", *American Ethnologist*, Vol.17, No.1, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford UK and Malden MA USA on behalf of American Anthropological Association, Arlington, February 1990, pp. 42-47

imposed on women's movements, indicating new forms of powers of restriction. With the change in socio economical conditions women's aspirations changed to the acquirement of products in an ever growing consumerist society. Influenced by television, and a consumerist way of life, young women aspired to have husbands who could provide for them in new ways. Their sedentary lifestyles now saw them under the control of restrictions imposed by husbands who would provide for them in return for limitations imposed on them. Men's powers transformed to include providing for them in return of punishing them or rewarding them in keeping with the restrictions they imposed. The young women's aspirations were looked at with disdain by the elder women who never sought such ambitions, hence locating another form of resistance in the younger women's lives to the disapproval of their elders. These new sets of power relations emerged from emulating Egyptian middle class urban life, which is enmeshed in debts to the West and penetration by the state and hence created new forms of subjection. In their new aspirations, the young women caught themselves in a new set of power relations that were bound to the Egyptian economy and the state, where power depended on the regulating of individuals. The penetration of consumerism and the discipline of state institutions added to the complexity of structures of dominations faced by the Bedouin women. But these processes also provoked new forms of resistance in the lives of the Bedouin community, especially those that had moved to the cities. They showed a growing interest in the Islamic movement which was viewed in the Arab world itself as a form of resistance to western influence, consumerism and control by a westernised elite. By participating in this movement through a change in dress and behaviour, men and women from the Bedouin community were resisting contradictory power relations they were caught in. While on the one hand they were resisting the demands of their elders and kin based authority, on the other they were resisting the demands of a national westernised capitalist state where they were marginalized because of their lack of education and ties to the elite. Abu-Lughod argues that in analysing everyday resistances, one can come to understand the range of strategies and structures of power.⁴³⁵

Mahmood draws out distinctions on the notion of freedom in feminist scholarship and discusses concepts around positive and negative freedom that have provided much ground for

⁴³⁵ Abu-Lughod, *ibid*, pp. 48-53

debate. Positive freedom refers to the capacity to realise an autonomous will in accordance to the dictates of universal reason and self-interest. This self-directed action is unencumbered by patriarchal norms or the will of others. Negative freedom refers to the absence of external obstacles to self-guided choice and action, and is defined through spaces in women's lives where there is no coercive presence and is independent of male influence. Underlying both these concepts is the common notion of individual autonomy. What this generates is the idea that for an individual to be free, it is necessary that her actions are the consequence of her own will, rather than custom, tradition or coercion. Therefore, even illiberal actions are considered free if they are undertaken as part of an individual's free will and personal accord. Both these notions have been used to expand debates in feminist practice. What Mahmood wishes to assert through these descriptions rather is that the normative subject in post-structuralist feminist theory nevertheless remains a libidinal one, whose agency is read in terms of her resistance to social norms.⁴³⁶

For women in the mosque movement, piety was achieved through both devotional and worldly practices, where dispositions were inculcated through a disciplined training of the body, emotions and reason until religious virtues were acquired as embodied habits. Speaking of one such religious virtue, shyness or *haya*, Mahmood relates how a woman explained the way she managed to inculcate such a virtue that was not part of her being before. With a sense of discipline, she not only inculcated it but also internalised it till it was part of her. The same is expressed for the act of taking the veil, as a disciplined method of embodying an act. Mahmood points out the disciplinary techniques through which the capacity of shyness is created and observes that in this program of self-cultivation, bodily acts like modesty, shyness or wearing the veil are not simply outward appearances but rather, they are connected to the interiorised self. This aspect is crucial to understand the disciplinary program that participants of the mosque movement pursue, and its significance is missed when the veil is simply understood as a symbol of women's subordination. For the women in the mosque movement, the veil is not a symbol of identity but a command of God. The veil serves as one of the practices to attain the goal internal to the practice; that of creating the shy and modest self. It therefore serves as a

⁴³⁶ Mahmood, "Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival", *ibid*, pp. 207

means of being and becoming a certain kind of person. This acquired faculty in which the mind, body and emotions are simultaneously trained to achieve competence at something is linked to the term *habitus*, which has come to be known best in the social sciences through the work of Pierre Bourdieu. Mahmood adds an older meaning of this term, which is Aristotelian in origin. In this meaning, *habitus* refers to the pedagogical process by which moral virtues are acquired through a coordination of outward behaviour and inward disposition. It may be described also as a conscious effort to reorient desires by the combination of inward motives and outward actions through the repeated practice of virtuous deeds.⁴³⁷

In pointing out these arguments, of how practices in the mosque movement are read in western frameworks of analysis and how they may be perceived differently because of peculiarity of the traditions they are studying, Mahmood argues that different analytical frameworks are secured in their own cultural or historical contexts and when these are brought in to analyse non liberal traditions, it is necessary to reflect whether the elements that make up the framework are adequate for what they are examining.

The intention behind presenting these debates about agency, forms of power and resistance is not only to bring to light the domination of western liberal debates that create hegemonic forms and structures through which analytical frameworks are constructed, but also to reassess these from a different perspective and understand ways of constructing the self by examining thought processes in non liberal traditions. Where notions about selfhood and agency are a given, if they are examined in the perspective of cultures and conditions that perpetuate new understandings of resistance, the panorama widens. If Development agencies perpetuate notions of agency through pre determined agendas, as they do in the case of theatre by extracting Boal's methods outside of their context and imposing them on cultures, the dangers seem apparent. If political theatre groups adhere to ideologies that speak more of the historical context that they were constructed in without renewing them or extending them within the content of the present, they face the risk of limiting their own thought processes and

⁴³⁷ Mahmood, "Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival", *ibid*, pp. 212-217

remaining formulaic in their practice. I now bring the discussion towards a recent *Ajoka* play that in my opinion does just that by addressing the issue of the veil in a fairly reductionist manner.

Burqavaganza – Ajoka 2007

This play is set in contemporary Pakistan and according to *Ajoka*'s commentary of the play, is a farce that uses songs and dance to highlight social problems and contradictions in the society. In view of the rise of the fundamental parties which are linked with extremist elements such as the Taliban who have pushed to forward their agenda to "Islamise" Pakistan, this play comments on the implications of this on Pakistani society. Enforcements affecting the society include the attempts to confine women to their homes, setting dress codes for men as well as women, which in the latter case manifests itself in the form of the *Burqa* or veil. The *Burqa* is referred to as a symbol of this ultra conservative ideology, a defiance of the West and an extremist retrogressive political program. The significance of this is also viewed by *Ajoka* in the light of recent events that have seen the surge of the conservative element in the society in the form of either women Islamic scholars who give emotionally charged lectures at women-only gatherings attended by middle class urban women in "specially designed *Burqas*", or women moral police belonging to an Islamist school in Islamabad whose stick welding protests challenged the writ of the government. *Ajoka* clarifies in its statement that the play should not be taken as a derisive approach to anyone's beliefs or dress preferences and that it aimed to address contentious issues in a light hearted manner.⁴³⁸

Constructed into twenty-four scenes, the play does not offer a particular narrative except in the presence of a pair of lovers who are constantly looking for ways to meet under strict social and familial supervision, and find themselves in various disconnected situations, each drawn as a comment on various social practices. They may be found in the park pursued by policemen who disapprove of young men and women meeting, or lauding the hysterionics of a woman religious scholar at a gathering, an obvious spoof of a well known scholar who has a large following in middle class Pakistani society. The comedy of the situation is invoked by the fact that every character in the entire play wears a *Burqa*, sometimes fashioned according to the

⁴³⁸ Shahid Nadeem, *Selected Plays*, Oxford University Press, Karachi, 2008, pp.282-284

conservative code that is apparently visible in daily life, or re invented as versions that comment on the fashion status that the *Burqa* has acquired. Therefore, all women as well as men wear the *Burqa* and the lovers escape most situations because they, like everyone else, are not recognised. They are recognised by their parents from the style of their *Burqas* and appraised by their prospective in laws because of the quality of their apparel. The disconnected style of placing these events allows for the insertion of various skits which do not have any linear logic, except to highlight the overwhelming presence of the extremist belief system in society. We find a scene that depicts the unveiling of a monument by a “*Burqa* Brigade” (with reference to the moral police women who also called themselves Brigades), by its Commander in the presence of the Minister of *Burqa* Affairs, another that reveals a police hunt for the terrorist *Burqa Bin Batin* (*Burqa* son of the Hidden, an obvious pun on Osama bin Laden). Suffice to say all references in the play are directed towards the presence of the *Burqa*, even in the most unnatural of circumstances. Interspersed through these are scenes that reference religious television call-in shows, in which callers pose problems to religious scholars and solutions are presented in the light of Islamic schools of thought. The scholars in these scenes use text extracted from a nineteenth century text (*Bahishti Zavar*, or Heavenly Ornaments), which was a reformist text that offered a code of Muslim behaviour and dress, especially directed at women. The text extracted for inclusion in these scenes references dress codes and sexual behaviour, particularly the complicity of women to their husbands’ needs. Also interspersed are multi media projections, implying the media industry, and depict cricket matches played by an all *burqa*-clad team, advertisements to sell torches for better visibility when donning a *burqa*, and documentaries about the *Burqa* through the ages.

Undoubtedly these are means to direct fun at and therefore comment upon the influences of an extremist mindset in Pakistani society which has infiltrated all walks of life. I do not dismiss the play as simplistic because it references a culture that has emerged through the spread of extremist belief systems. Perhaps the *Burqa* referenced as something that hides is also a comment on the fact that everything in the social or political structure has dual meaning and that everyone is trying to hide something or the other. For me the problem arises in the overt use of the veil as a means to make a larger comment on society. In using the veil as a

symbol of oppression, *Ajoka* not only simplifies the issues at hand, but also offends those who approach the directness of the visual image as an attack on themselves. So while *Ajoka*'s liberal audiences may have cheered them on, the conservative elements in the society objected to the play and influenced a verbal ban on it in the National Assembly. In using the veil as a distinct form of oppression, *Ajoka* follows the same ideology as the western liberal approach that views non liberal traditions as oppressive. The veil is worn in Pakistan for a diverse set of reasons, some based on practicality, some as a following of the Islamist movements that have also emerged in Pakistan, and some for entirely cultural and traditional reasons. As Saba Mahmood argues, the liberatory goals of feminism should be re thought of and the motivational forces behind the desire for freedom cannot be assumed in advance but need to be considered in the light of other desires and aspirations that are inherent in a culturally located subject. The relationship between the body, the self and moral agency is constituted differently in different cultural and political locations and one cannot hold one particular model as self evident or obvious compared to the rest.⁴³⁹

Citing examples of Turkey's Ataturk and Iran's ruler Reza Shah in the early 1920's, Leila Ahmed typifies them as early advocates of unveiling. Reza Shah's issuance of a proclamation on banning the veil was met with resistance by the popular classes. In their contempt for the veil, both rulers proved to be men "exposed to the Western discourse who [...] accepted its representation of their culture, the inferiority of its practices, and the meaning of the veil."⁴⁴⁰ She explains that this act could be understood against the background of global dominance of the Western world and the authority of its discourse, as well as the position of men and women of the Muslim upper classes whose economical interests and cultural aspirations bound them to the colonising West.

Referring to the role of the image to be vital in communication, miriam cooke presents Roman Jakobson's argument about communication being about the degree to which a message can pass between an addresser and an addressee. Both must agree upon a language and

⁴³⁹ Mahmood, "Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival", *ibid*, p.223

⁴⁴⁰ Leila Ahmed, "Discourse of the Veil" in *"Women and Gender in Islam. Historical Roots of a Modern Debate"*, Yale University Press, 1992, pp.164-65

context in order to verbalise a message. However, an emotive or expressive function, focussed on the addresser serves to be a key factor that informs the context. cooke furthers this argument by adding that this model of communication must include what she calls “imageness”; a visual reality that shapes consciousness. The cultural images we bring with us to a first encounter are not likely to change. By emphasising the importance of “imageness”, cooke argues that interlocutors do not deal with the individual alone, or with the individual contextualised, but have to contend with and overcome the imageness they have of each other.⁴⁴¹ cooke proves that the image of the veiled Muslim woman as passive and oppressed has therefore become common because it signifies beyond itself to a general category, like a faith or a culture. Images we have of each other become part of a baggage we bring to a dialogue. “It is the degree to which the image is present in dialogue that affects the ways in which identity is articulated. The less clear and present the image, the less community-centred and more individuated will be the sense of self projected. The more the image interposes itself between the addresser and addressee, the more community defined will be the individual identity. This seems particularly the case for Muslim women when they veil.”⁴⁴²

It is evident that the image of the *Burqa* present in all the scenes of *Burqavaganza* that depict oppression or injustices, contribute towards the building of the “imageness” or a visual reality that shapes consciousness that cooke refers to.

Extract from Scene 4 *Burqavaganza* – Police Station

Police dressed in veils. An identification parade is in progress. A Constable is trying to figure out who is who:

Constable: Sir, how can we tell who is behind which *Burqa*?

Officer: You are really stupid constable. If an officer has a sharp eye, the *Burqa* itself will say, “I am guilty” or “I am a slave trader” or “I am a sex trader” or “I am a stock market trader”.

⁴⁴¹ miriam cooke, “Multiple Critique” in *Women Claim Islam*, Routledge, 2001, p.128

⁴⁴² cook, *ibid*, p.130

Constable: But Sir, what if an officer is in a *Burqa* or a mask....

Officer: Then a *Burqa* may be lifted like this (*lifts the constable's mask and is shocked by what he sees*).

Constable: Thank you Sir. I am much enlightened.

Extract from Scene 5: The Unveiling Ceremony

Burqa Brigade: Show your burq-ID

Khoob: (the hero) Why? Do you doubt our burq-identity?

Burqa Brigade: Do you have a Burqeology Department Card?

Has (the heroine): We are not students. We are reporters from the *Burqa* Times.

Burqa Brigade: Show us your press cards then.

Khoob: You want *Burqa* reporters to show their cards? Our *Burqas* are our cards.

Burqa Brigade: Your *Burqas* are suspicious.

Extract from Scene 15: Couple's Rendezvous

Has: Khoobroo!

Khoob: Yes Beloved!

Has: You know my parents are coming to see you.

Khoob: Really? And did I tell you that my parents liked your picture?

- Has: Which one? The one in the pink *Burqa*?
- Khoob: No, the one in the shuttlecock *Burqa*⁴⁴³. My mum said, I want a conservative daughter in law and she seems to be the one.
- Has: But does she know that inside this old fashioned *Burqa*, I am quite modern.
- Khoob: You should not tell your folks either that I act in *Burqa* Vision plays.
- Has: Do you think I'm a fool? But do be careful.⁴⁴⁴

In analysing some texts in Western feminist writings Chandra Talpade Mohanty argues that these texts produce a composite, singular 'third world woman' – "an image which appears arbitrarily constructed, but nevertheless carries with it the authorising signature of Western humanist discourse."⁴⁴⁵ The writer observes that a sizable extent of Western feminist work on women in the third world is characterised by assumptions of privilege and an inadequate self-consciousness about the effect of Western scholarship on the third world in the context of a world system that is dominated by the West. While such writings need not be generalised and would indeed involve levels of complexity, Mohanty identifies such an *effect* of the representation of the third world woman as a coherent one, where women are defined in terms of their object value.

Burqavaganza reinforces this object value to a symbol that lends itself to more complex meanings as discussed earlier and in doing so does not take into account the desires, motivations and aspirations of the people to whom such practices are important. As Saba Mahmood succinctly concludes, it is not enough to simply point that a tradition of piety or

⁴⁴³ A particular style of *Burqa* worn by women in Northern Pakistan, similar to the ones worn in Afghanistan.

⁴⁴⁴ Shahid Nadeem, *ibid*, pp.292-296

⁴⁴⁵ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses" in *"Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism"*, Indiana University Press, 1991, p.53

modesty legitimises women's subordination. It is only through exploring these traditions in relation to the practical engagements and forms of life in which they are embedded that we can come to understand the significance of that subordination and the women who embody it. She emphasises a need for an intrinsic openness that must be inherent in the study of non liberal traditions, along with a critical engagement and a willingness to re evaluate one's own views in the light of the Other's.⁴⁴⁶

Urging for an expansion on the idea of criticism that is prevalent in feminist and progressive debate, where criticism is about demolishing the opponent's position and exposing the implausibility of his / her debate, I find Saba Mahmood's definition for Critique to very aptly fit my argument for a need to extend one's own understanding beyond a dominant discourse.

"Critique, I believe, is most powerful when it leaves open the possibility that we might also be re made in the process of engaging another's world view, that we might come to learn things that we did not already know before we undertook the engagement. This requires that we occasionally turn the critical gaze upon ourselves, to leave open the possibility that we may be remade though an encounter with the other".⁴⁴⁷

⁴⁴⁶ Mahmood, "Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival", *ibid*, p.225

⁴⁴⁷ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, *ibid*, pp.36-37

CONCLUSION

In the span of thirty years since the beginning of political theatre by *Tehrik e Niswan* and *Ajoka*, Pakistan has undergone enormous political upheavals, both internally and in the face of global developments. Faced with internal threats by the Islamist fundamentalists in the north and the ever-increasing pressure internationally to curb the supply of terrorism from its frontiers, Pakistan is fighting a two-pronged battle. As Ayesha Jalal puts it, Pakistanis are not just battling against religious bigotry and insularity, but also “the perceived injustices” of the outside world that misunderstands and misrepresents the complex realities of present day Pakistan.⁴⁴⁸

Amongst other perceptions, these misrepresentations may also be read as the way development agencies have stepped in through the growth of globalisation and helped perpetuate a culture that has determined a generic approach to “lesser developed countries”. The role of the state has gradually diminished as a provider of health, security, and education and has been delegated to the private sector and to multi national organisations. In the same vein, the oppressive role of the state has also diminished, amusingly compared by the artist Quddus Mirza, to the gradual fading away of the videocassette, telegram and the dish antenna.⁴⁴⁹ The state oppression of artists, theatre practitioners, journalists is now a thing of the past, and a distinct contrast to the politically oppressive atmosphere that *Tehrik e Niswan* and *Ajoka* worked in. Of course the theatre groups now face other forms of hostility, perhaps more pernicious than the overt oppression of the military regime, in the guise of the “invisible enemy”, the silent attacker of performance venues, or the anonymous bomb threat caller before a performance. This is perhaps a deadlier battle to face than the one where activists joined forces because they believed in social change. And to add to that the gradually transforming mindset of a middle class towards a conservatism that verges on intolerance, the challenges are volatile indeed.

⁴⁴⁸ Ayesha Jalal, “Rustled Silences. The Past in Pakistan’s Present”, in *Hanging Fire. Contemporary Art from Pakistan*. (ed.) Salima Hashmi, Asia Society, New York, 2009. p.37

⁴⁴⁹ Quddus Mirza, “Exile at Home. Pakistani Art in the Global Age”, in *Hanging Fire. Contemporary Art from Pakistan*. (ed.) Salima Hashmi, Asia Society, New York, 2009. p.67

But given that the political environment that *Tehrik e Niswan* and *Ajoka* began work in does not exist, how should they re formulate their political ideologies in the changing socio political landscape of Pakistan? Should their work reflect issues of the day overtly, as some of their works did on the past, subscribe to the narrow and linear approach as theatre groups under Development agendas do now, or look for subtler shifts in their work that might address the complexity of the socio political climate and culture we live in today? A complexity of culture where nothing is a given, where there is more than one approach to an issue, and where perhaps cultural activism is replaced by an all embracing attitude that is in turn received by a multitude of interpretations. Reflecting upon a similar situation faced by visual artists in Pakistan today, Mirza observes that contemporary artists no longer confronted with political oppression or a climate of hostility find themselves at a loss when looking for subject matter. While themes of gender, dislocation, and tradition do find themselves in the work of some artists, others express themselves more directly by commenting on the terrorism that is encountered in the day-to-day life of a Pakistani. But there is another approach by artists who address the visual vocabulary of their work as both local and international, public and private. Working with individual concepts their work is neither determined by internal or external influences or pressures and reflects the complexity of their culture. Their work is not embedded in some politically correct statement, nor does it present singular linear interpretations of their concerns.⁴⁵⁰

One reason for drawing this analogy stems from my own background as a visual artist where my art practice has represented my responses to the socio political conditions of my environment. Equipped with the power to subvert and imbue layers of meaning within it, my work has never been directly confrontational, linear in meaning or issue-based. Rather it has within its own subtle, humorous and sometimes dark way allowed for several readings to be embedded within it. As theatre has informed my art practice, lending it a theatricality in its form, so I hope will my art practice and its intentions inform the theatre I foresee as the one that must now begin a new life beyond the world of political theatre. Between political theatre and development theatre, there is a third space that needs to be recognised and channelled to a

⁴⁵⁰ Mirza, *ibid*, pp.67-70

new form of expression. Perhaps this is where we will find the radical theatre that Kershaw speaks of, a space outside the institutions of theatre and one that is connected to the conditions of the contemporary and to the cultural, political and social tensions of its time. As in art practice, several contemporary Pakistani artists have lent a forceful presence to the voice of the artist, so I hope, will theatre grow out of its comfort zone into un-chartered territory to find itself a new voice of expression. Perhaps this will be a theatre that is not burdened with the responsibility of upholding its own political legacy or one that is not determined by forces that are extraneous to itself. As an artist is compelled to make work that is a response to his surroundings and also open to multiple meanings, so can this theatre, in its response to the cultural, political and social conditions of its time, allow for the process of meaning-making to emerge as part of its expression.

Another reason for drawing this analogy between visual art and theatre is to suggest that practitioners of these seminal groups are now in a position to reflect upon and rethink their perspective of the political under the ever-changing socio political conditions of the country. Armed with a vocabulary that has led them in a battlefield for three decades, perhaps it is also time to expand the vocabulary contextually by rethinking practices and beyond the familiar and dominant discourse. In the face of an overabundance of theatre groups emerging to produce well funded plays for charity events, or generously sponsored by the corporate sector, there is an ever more need to set oneself apart from the dominant discourse. Now after nearly decades, perhaps it is time to begin the process of that reinvention.

Certainly the process of writing this thesis as a theatre practitioner and an artist has led me to make these connections rather than separate these practices as they have been in the past. This writing has emerged as a connecting thread between the two practices and the means for allowing the beginning of a thought process that compels me to think of the overlaps and the ways in which each can inform the other. And certainly as a theatre practitioner, it has led me to urgently seek new ways of re-inventing a practice that needs rejuvenation. While I cannot formulate what shape that rejuvenation will take, and in what form it will occupy this third space, I can certainly say that the research in this thesis has led me to take a position in this

debate and understand the practice from several theoretical perspectives. This perhaps, then, is the beginning of yet another journey that will have its own set of failures and false starts. The secret of course, is to be reflective, self critical, and most importantly, courageous enough allow oneself to make mistakes.

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APPENDIX

Biographical sketch – Sheema Kermani

Founder *Tehrik e Niswan*

Born in Rawalpindi in 1951 to parents who were migrants from India, Sheema Kermani spent most of her childhood in various army cantonment areas of Pakistan where her father was posted in the army. Commissioned in the British India army before Partition, Brigadier Salahuddin Ahmed Kermani was posted in Quetta in 1947 and married Meher Fatima in 1948 in Hyderabad Deccan, India.

The second of three children, Sheema Kermani received her schooling in various convent schools in the Army Cantonments of Lahore, Rawalpindi, Murree and Kharian (Punjab), before the family finally moved to Karachi in 1963. Her interest in drama had been a childhood occupation when she would put up plays with her cousins who visited the family during the summer. In Karachi she studied at the prestigious Convent of Jesus and Mary school for O levels and later The Karachi Grammar School (KGS) for A levels, where she was also Benazir Bhutto's contemporary. Early interests in the debating society, drama and the arts at both schools proved to be starting points for her later political interests and career as a theatre practitioner. She recalls reading a range of Russian and Chinese literature to inform her interest in the debating society. The access to Russian literature came about because of her proximity to the Russian Cultural Centre (Friendship House) in her neighbourhood where weekly film screenings of Russian films and easy library access opened a new world to her and also formulated a political thought process at a very early age in life.

Seeking to pursue an art education Kermani spontaneously walked into the Croydon College of Art, for admission one summer when the family was visiting her brother who was studying Chartered Accountancy in the UK. She had initiated the process without her parents' knowledge and found resistance once she informed them of her admission in the Foundation Programme. Finally managing to gain partial financial support from her parents, Kermani spent the year studying and working on odd jobs to support herself. Returning to Pakistan in the winter of 1971 for a holiday, Kermani did not manage to return when the India Pakistan war broke out and her father also began to suffer poor health. Moving in with her parents Kermani

decided to pursue her political interests and also revive her interest in Indian Classical Dance for which she had been training from the age of fourteen at the Ghanshyam Dance Academy, a family run institute for dance and music in Karachi.

With her leftist inclinations, Kermani met like-minded people at the Karachi University or at Russian literature bookshops where members of the Communist party met regularly. Many of her oldest associations were formed in her early twenties when she met people like the radical feminist poet Fahmida Riaz, or Karachi University student Parveen Kazmi, one of the women with whom she later formed the women's training centre that ultimately became *Tehrik e Niswan*. This is also the time when she met the theatre practitioner Ali Ahmed who with his IPTA background and leftist leanings was performing agit prop theatre in Karachi. On a personal front she was also facing family pressure to marry but could not succumb to the lifestyle that such a proposition offered, and continued to negotiate the difference between her parents' upper class background and her own political views.

Her interest in the work carried out by the trade unions led her to work with them in the low-income communities where they extended their activism. Along with some women she set up Adult and Children's literacy centres and essentially formed solidarity with the women who worked in the textile factories.

In 1971 she also met a factory worker Karamat Ali, who later became a leader in his factory and a member of a Left group. His working class background was in sharp contrast to that of Kermani's and objectionable to her parents. In 1973 – 74 things came to a head when the police followed Kermani home after she attended a workers' rally. Totally unaccepting of this Kermani's parents asked her to curb her activities or leave home. She chose the latter option. Quitting her school teaching job, she rented a single room in a middle class locality and took up a job as a secretary in a Pharmaceutical firm. Soon after, she married Karamat Ali and moved with him into an apartment in another middle class locality of Karachi. The marital relationship did not last very long and Kermani decided to move out and rented a place of her own. A timely opportunity for Karamat Ali to study at the Institute of Social Studies at The Hague through a

scholarship programme helped terminate a lingering relationship. Meanwhile the prospect to study further also opened many avenues for Ali and he returned to Pakistan many years later to establish the Pakistan Institute of Labour Education and Research (PILER).

In 1971, Kermani also met a music student Khalid Ahmed at the Ghanshyam Academy who later formed strong ties with *Tehrik e Niswan* as a writer and director. An engineer by profession, he studied at the NED University of Engineering and Technology at Karachi and went to London to pursue a Masters degree on a scholarship. Upon his return in 1983, he became part of Kermani's close circle of activist friends and in fact assisted her in producing the second proscenium production for *Tehrik e Niswan*'s first play (*Dard kay Faasley*) in 1984. By this time in the early 80's *Tehrik e Niswan* had begun some theatre activity and also performed for the Women's Action Forum on some occasions. Ahmad and Kermani got married soon after and he continued to hold a teaching job at the NED University while working with *Tehrik e Niswan* in the theatre productions.

The political climate and the energy of activism created a solidarity amongst many of the practitioners and activists who shared their ideals in the 80's. In fact Kermani recalls working closely with the inception of the theatre group DASTAK in the early 80's with Mansoor Saeed and Aslam Azhar until a rift drew them apart and separated their ways. In the mid 80's Kermani persuaded Ahmad to apply for a scholarship to study Drama in the UK. Ahmad managed to receive admission upon that basis at the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art (LAMDA).

Kermani's other professional interest in dance has led her to pursue classical dance in the Bharat Natyam and Odissi styles since her early years of training. She also performs regularly and has trained a number of students in the discipline. Her quest to learn dance took her to India in 1983 and 1989 where she opted to study informally under the tutelage of masters.

After his return from LAMDA in 1991, Ahmad and Kermani continued to write, direct and produce plays for *Tehrik e Niswan* through the 1990's until they parted ways in 1999. Kermani

continues to be the driving force behind *Tehrik e Niswan* and has simultaneously continued her practice as a dancer, sometimes in very difficult times. Independent and fierce in her convictions, Kermani's life continues to be an inspiration for many around her.⁴⁵¹

⁴⁵¹ Interview, Sheema Kermani, *Tehrik e Niswan*, Karachi 21 July 2009

AJOKA THEATRE

Biographical sketch – Madeeha Gauhar

Founder *Ajoka Theatre*

Born in 1956, Madeeha Gauhar grew up with diverse family influences. Her father Ali Gauhar Jaffery belonged to the Shia sect of Islam and came from a family of Peshawar that traced its ancestry to the Mongols of Central Asia. Her mother Khadija Gauhar was born in South Africa in a Sunni Muslim family of migrants from Gujarat in India who set up a fruit and grocery business in Cape Town. While her father did not stay in Peshawar for very long once he was in the army and posted to various places, her mother remained in Cape Town till her schooling was over. A strong woman and a deep influence on Madeeha's life, Khadija Gauhar was a well-read and politically aware woman, who had experienced apartheid and witnessed the creation of the African National Congress. Many of her friends were part of the nascent anti apartheid movement. Her move to Pakistan came as a result of her resistance to her father's decision to get her married; a pronouncement she rejected and rebelled against until her father agreed to allow her to study further in Lahore. She arrived in Lahore in 1949 where she joined the Kinnaird College for women, and found the feudal environment in Lahore and the Protestant missionary ethos at Kinnaird a sharp contrast to her life in Cape Town. It was on one of her holiday trips to the northern areas of Pakistan with a student colleague that she met the latter's brother and her future husband. Their young romance continued till Khadija moved to London after college to pursue further studies in 1952, where Ali Gauhar Jaffery was also posted at the High Commission of Pakistan following his resignation from the army. They married the same year despite strong disapproval from their parents because of their distinctly different backgrounds. Reconciliation did not occur till 1959 when the couple had moved from Karachi where her father was posted, to Lahore.⁴⁵² Throughout her life Khadija Gauhar worked actively as a writer and freelance journalist, an activist for an anti Apartheid organisation based in Pakistan and a voluntary social worker for an organisation that provided health services in the northern region of Baltistan.⁴⁵³

⁴⁵² Madeeha Gauhar, "My Several Worlds", *The Friday Times*, Lahore, August 31- September 6 2007, pp.16-18

⁴⁵³ Interview by telephone, Madeeha Gauhar, 4 August 2009

Madeeha Gauhar's early interest in theatre was sparked by her school's active involvement with Dramatics. Her schooling years at the Convent of Jesus and Mary in Lahore lent her unusual exposure through the inter school dramatics festivals and collaborative dramatics ventures with other schools. Encouraged by a liberal environment at home, Gauhar's friends came from diverse educated middle class backgrounds. Distinct from her friends Gauhar showed an avid interest for reading and was a regular member at the British Council library. Gauhar recalls witnessing the turbulent political era of the 60's in Pakistan when the anti Ayub Khan movement was underway. Her home was frequented by many left intellectuals and activists that included Major Ishtiaq Mohammad of the *Mazdoor Kisaan Party* and Safdar Mir a previous member of IPTA. Her place was also an open house for foreign students studying in Lahore, primarily South Africans and Palestinians, whose heated debates invigorated the atmosphere.

In 1970 the conflict in East Pakistan was coming to a head and at school Gauhar was one of the very few who vociferously voiced her opinion against the atrocities of the Pakistani army in East Pakistan. Following her father's death the same year, Gauhar accompanied her mother to discussions and political. In 1971, she got the opportunity at school to participate in a British Council initiated theatre workshop conducted by Safdar Mir, which led to a production of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. The seriousness of the venture instilled a deep impression on Gauhar to pursue theatre in the years to come. In 1971 the war with India had also erupted and having completed her O Levels Gauhar volunteered to nurse the wounded at the Combined Military Hospital in Lahore. Encountered with the brutalities of war and the separation of a wing of the country, Gauhar marks 1971 as not only the end of East Pakistan but also the end of a childhood.⁴⁵⁴

In 1972 Gauhar took admission at the Kinnaird College where she soon became an active member of the Dramatics Society. Theatre activities spurned into action when she was invited by the Government College Dramatics Club to play a lead role in Sarmad Sehbai's play

⁴⁵⁴ Madeeha Gauhar, "Goodbye my girlhood", *The Friday Times*, Lahore, 14-20 September 2007, pp.24-25

Phandey (Nooses). The success of this venture invited offers for her to act for a television play following which she became a regular actor for television. Elected president of the Dramatic Society at Kinnaird in her final year in 1974-75, she directed an Urdu / Punjabi play for the inter class theatre festival. The experience lent her confidence to direct a production based on Lorca's *The House of Bernada Alba* in 1975 to mark International Women's Year. Following her graduation in 1975, she directed a play on the subject of apartheid in South Africa for the Foreign Students Association at the Punjab University. Consisting of a mixed cast of actors from South Africa, Ethiopia, Iran and Palestine, the play was performed at the University's Institute of Education and Research Department that later became the stronghold of a right wing student faction, the *Jamiat*. Following a delay in University admissions, Gauhar went to Islamabad in 1976 to join the National Institute of Modern Languages to study Chinese and was awarded a scholarship to go to China the same year when the Cultural Revolution had come to an end and China was undergoing a transition in its own history.⁴⁵⁵

Upon her return from China, Gauhar married Sarwat Ali in 1977, whom she had met during her theatre activity at the Government College. Problematic from the beginning, the marriage did not last very long. 1977 was also the year when Pakistan underwent turmoil after Zia ul Haque's martial law. When Gauhar joined the Government College for her Masters in English Literature, she found the previously liberal atmosphere repressive and under the control of a conservative establishment. Despite the constraints, some students managed to keep the literary and dramatics society alive and Gauhar became the secretary of the Dramatics Club. There was a great deal of opposition to the staging of Satre's "Men Without Shadows" because it was considered to be a comment on the dictatorship in Pakistan. Given the authoritarian atmosphere and its effects on the state owned media, Gauhar gave up acting for television.

Following the completion of her Masters in 1981 and a short holiday to England, which allowed her exposure to theatre in London, Gauhar returned to Lahore to take up a teaching job at the Government College in the outskirts of Lahore in Gujranwala, and was later transferred to Lahore. Protests against Zia's rule were emerging strongly in the Punjab and Sindh, and in

⁴⁵⁵ Madeeha Gauhar, "Those were the Days", *The Friday Times*, Lahore, 21-27 September 2007, pp.28-29

1983 Gauhar was arrested when she participated in a rally led by the Women's Action Forum (WAF) against the Law of Evidence. Eight months later she was arrested from her house under the draconian Preventive Detention Order and kept confined for ten days in jail along with eighteen women of different ages and diverse backgrounds who shared the same spirit of protest.⁴⁵⁶ In 1982, Gauhar married Khalid Basra who was a class fellow from the Government College, and now a civil servant from a highly conservative background. She faced complete unacceptance from Basra's family, which she thinks ultimately contributed to their separation some years later.

Gauhar's experience with theatre and her involvement with the women's movement led her to perform short plays or skits at the meetings held by WAF. The success of these experiences ultimately led to the formation of *Ajoka* in 1984. An earlier family visit to India had allowed her to visit Delhi where she had the opportunity to visit the National School of Drama and collect scripts of Hindi plays and their English translations. One such play *Ja'loos* by Badal Sircar became the first production for *Ajoka*. Performed in the lawns of her mother's house in the absence of any public venue, the play invited scrutiny from the agencies. Gauhar was charge-sheeted consequentially dismissed from her teaching post. Following *Ajoka*'s inaugural play, Gauhar left for the UK on a British Council scholarship in Autumn 1984 to do her Masters in Theatre Studies at the Royal Holloway College. Her dissertation on western influences on Indian theatre took her to India for research and she met many leading personalities on the Indian theatre front. Returning to Lahore in 1985, she resumed work with *Ajoka* which had been continuing in her absence with the help of a few friends and her mother. Through theatre workshops held with the assistance of the British Council, she inducted new members including Mohammad Waseem who now heads the Interactive Research Centre in Lahore. This is also the time when a lasting relationship with the Goethe Institute emerged as Gauhar sought an alternative venue (from her mother's house) for rehearsals and performances. She also returned to London to be with Basra who was studying musicology at the School of Oriental and African Studies under a British Council scholarship. Pressured by the family Basra was unable

⁴⁵⁶ Madeeha Gauhar, "Through the Dark Night", *The Friday Times*, Lahore, 28 September-4 October 2007, pp.28-29

to cope with the relationship and suffered a breakdown. After his recovery Gauhar and he agreed to part amicably and remained friends until his untimely and tragic death in 1998.⁴⁵⁷

In 1986-87 when Gauhar was in London, she met Shahid Nadeem who had been in exile there since 1979. A student leader in his university days, and a producer at Pakistan Television (PTV) when Zia's martial law reigned in, Nadeem was imprisoned for a year because of his union activities at PTV. After his release, he went into exile and began working for Amnesty International in London. It was a coincidence that despite working at the same television station, neither Gauhar nor Nadeem had met each other. Yet they had heard of each other and struck up a friendship immediately once they met at a mutual friend's. Gauhar asked Nadeem to contribute his writing skills to *Ajoka*, and he wrote an original play *Barri* (Acquittal) along with giving *Ajoka* two previously written and unstaged plays, *Marra Hoya Kutta* (The Dead Dog) and *Teesri Dastak* (The Third Knock).

With Nadeem's own recent separation from his wife and two children, he and Gauhar had both experienced unsuccessful relationships. Their romance ultimately led to marriage and when in 1988 Zia was killed in an air crash Nadeem returned to Pakistan, ending an eight year long exile. Reinstated at PTV, Nadeem continues to write original plays for *Ajoka*. Madeeha Gauhar continues to head *Ajoka* and lives with her husband and two sons in Lahore.⁴⁵⁸

⁴⁵⁷ Madeeha Gauhar, "To this night, a Dawn", *The Friday Times*, Lahore, 5-11 October 2007, pp.28-29

⁴⁵⁸ Madeeha Gauhar, "Que sera sera.. what will be will be", *The Friday Times*, Lahore, 12-18 October 2007, pp. 28-29