

## Exposed by Pakistani Street Theater

### THE UNHOLY ALLIANCE OF POSTMODERN CAPITALISM, PATRIARCHY, AND FUNDAMENTALISM

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The main question I will address in this essay is: What are the connections between postmodern capitalism in the era of globalization and the return to conservative, traditionalist attitudes toward life (the postmodern/traditionalist dichotomy)—which then converge to keep women oppressed in so-called Third World countries like Pakistan, which have witnessed the rise of Islamic “fundamentalism” in the last three decades of the twentieth century? My aim in asking and delineating possible answers to such a question is to draw attention to the complex convergence of “postmodern” economic and sociocultural factors and their ideological underpinnings, which are contributing to the rise of seemingly anachronistic or “premodern” fundamentalisms around the globe.

In the case of Pakistan, this connection between postmodern capitalism and the resurgence of Islamic fundamentalism has been made explicit through the theatrical work of many alternative theater groups, such as Tehrik-I-Niswan, Ajoka, and Punjab Lok Rehas, that formed in Pakistan in the early 1980s initially to counter the repressive religious policies being ushered into place under Zia ul-Haque.<sup>1</sup> Many of the more recent plays in the repertoire of several of the groups I have been researching do indeed make these linkages, especially a play entitled *Dukhini* (Suffering woman) by the Ajoka Theater group, which brings these issues to light through the theme of the trafficking of women who are smuggled from poverty-stricken Bangladesh across India and into Pakistan under the false promise of a “better life,” only to find themselves sold into prostitution to the highest bidder. These women are victims not only of postmodern consumerist ideology that treats women’s bodies as commodities to be bought and sold in the marketplace, but also of Islamist/traditionalist ideologies that work to keep them oppressed by convincing them of their “fallen nature.” Under such an ideology, it is never the rapist/buyer of sex who is blamed but the woman who is raped or forced into prostitution—she has to bear the burden of having “dishonored” her family, who will never accept her back because of the “shame” she has brought them!

In other plays by other groups, many actual cases of so-called honor killings or other violent acts against women such as stove-burnings, beatings, rape, and the like have also been used to shape the plots; several of these groups have also connected the rise of such hideous “Islamic”

crimes against women (which are never punished by the state or the courts) to global politics and economics, such as the infiltration into Pakistani society of the Taliban movement from neighboring Afghanistan, which was a creation of U.S. imperialism to keep the armament and drug trade flourishing for the benefit of consumer capitalism. *Saar*, for example, a play by the Punjab Lok Rehas group, portrays these societal conflicts by taking the real-life story of a young woman named Saima whose father brought a case against her in the courts for exercising her choice to marry without seeking his permission, citing the Islamic injunction of *wali* (guardian) in his favor, as the central event but weaving around it the larger and intertwined issues of unemployment and drug use by many disenchanted young men such as the heroine's brother, who needs money for his habit and uses the patriarchal/religious ideology of female "shame" to blackmail his sister (he has found out about her decision to elope with the man she loves and threatens to reveal her "dishonorable" behavior to their father if she doesn't supply him with cash).<sup>2</sup>

Thus, what I attempt to offer here is an analysis of the global conditions leading to women's oppression in Pakistan and, by implication, other "Third World" countries, in the hope that through such analysis can come the impetus for change—something that theater and other cultural activists in Pakistan are certainly aiming for through their work. Such an analysis and undertaking has become ever more crucial following the events of 11 September 2001, which have led thus far to more, rather than less, confusion in perceiving and accepting collective responsibility for the imbrication of the issues and ideologies I am outlining here.

### **Effects of Globalization in Pakistan**

It is a fact that ever since the end of the Cold War, the process of globalization that was initiated at the end of World War II has accelerated, and today almost all the countries on the map of the world are part of an economic coalition of sorts that has direct and indirect bearings on their peoples. Clearly, the role of developed countries through multinational companies (MNCs, also referred to as TNCs, or transnational companies) and international monetary institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in shaping the new economic paradigm has been enormous.<sup>3</sup> Since the 1980s, developing and debtor countries, mostly situated in the Southern Hemisphere, have been undergoing a significant economic change initiated at the whims of developed and creditor nations of the North (hence the North/South divide has replaced the East/West colonial paradigm). These changes have had enormous repercussions on the lives

of the people of the borrowing countries, and Pakistan is no exception. The economic changes that are being made under structural adjustment programs (SAPs) devised in response to the debt crisis of the 1980s (Nuruzzaman n.d., 1) by international lending agencies such as the IMF and the World Bank (which are really the imperial arm of the West in a postcolonial world) are proving disastrous for these countries in general and the common people in particular.

How, exactly, you might well ask, are the economic policies being put into place in Pakistan at the behest of these organizations—whose only real interest is to prevent countries like Pakistan from going bankrupt so that they can pay back the huge loans made in the past and continuing into the present by the lenders—proving detrimental to the people? A brief look at some of the “steps” implemented in Pakistan by SAPs in recent decades provides some answers:

- 1) Currency is devalued, which makes imports expensive.
- 2) Subsidies are cut on such products and essential services as water, public transport and electricity.
- 3) Interest rates are raised. This is supposed to discourage borrowing, control inflation, and keep capital from going out of the country.
- 4) Price controls are also lifted or phased out so that domestic prices come closer to international prices.
- 5) Number of public employees is cut down to reduce government expenditure.
- 6) New taxes are levied or the existing ones raised to collect large amounts of revenue.
- 7) Tax exemptions and other facilities given to certain industries and services because of their essential nature, for e.g., bicycles, are withdrawn.
- 8) Public concerns and services are rapidly privatized to raise capital. (Punjab Lok Sujag n.d., 5)

What do these “steps” tell us about the principles upon which SAPs are based? Obviously, the supporters of SAPs believe that governments are inefficient and not wise enough to take the best decisions for their countries. Therefore, according to such an ideology, a government should be gradually replaced by market forces because of the concomitant belief that capitalism is “time-proven” to be the most efficient economic system in the world. Thus, the ideological underpinnings of SAPs provide the wherewithal for multinational companies and the elite of the debtor society to join hands so that the ruling and ruled elites of the world can maximize their own wealth. In the health sector, for instance, we see what happens when SAPs are imposed on indebted Third World countries by the World Bank and IMF. The G-15 and Emerging Markets Business Infor-

mation Web site has a report by Nancy Chiu entitled “Health at Risk,” where the author states:

The poor have been and are still being severely hit by the implementation of SAPs. Budgets or allocation for health has been slashed. Public hospitals have been transformed into private hospitals, making them unaffordable for the poor. . . . Policies under the programs [SAPs] include cuts in public spending, reduced government expenditure in the health sector and increased charges for health and social services via privatisation. (Chiu 1999, 2)

The latest trade-related intellectual rights agreement (TRIPS), with which all developing nations were to comply by January 2000, further ensures the choke hold of TNCs on the economies of these countries since according to the patent protection stipulated in the agreement, any local competition to the pharmaceutical transnational corporations will be wiped out due to lack of resources for competition, and this will only mean escalating drug prices for the consumers, the majority of whom are poor, lack health coverage—and constitute 80 percent of these companies’ clientele. Bashir Ahmed, deputy chief of the International Trade Wing at Pakistan’s Ministry of Commerce, calls attention to the unfair structural conditions within such “agreements” (quoted in Chiu 1999, 2), which benefit only those at the top of the corporate structure—be they the “foreign” owners, managers, investors of the corporations, local managerial elites or shareholders, or rich businessmen who profit from the ensuing privatization of services.

Thus, we see how SAPs translate into a widening disparity between the rich and the poor. Indeed, SAPs are implemented with a belief in the “trickle-down” theory—that is, if enough wealth is created “at the top” due to “efficient” utilization of limited resources, wealth will eventually make its way down to the masses. In reality, what we see in Pakistan today is that due to inflation and the decreasing value of the rupee in contrast to the stronger dollar (in 2001, the exchange rate was U.S. \$1.00 = Pakistani Rs 65), basic amenities like water and electricity have become more expensive. This means that middle- and low-income earners are seeing their savings disappear and their lives being lived increasingly hand to mouth. On the contrary, the rich have become richer. When bank rates are increased under SAP policies, the rich keep their money in the banks and live off the interest! Furthermore, when producers come under pressure to produce goods cheaply in order to compete in the world market, there is an alarming increase in cheap labor—which translates into child and female labor—and unemployment for men and qualified personnel. As an illustration of the latter, the World Bank not too long ago advised

the government of Pakistan to lay off a certain percentage of employees of the Karachi Port Trust by giving them a “golden handshake” (Punjab Lok Sujag n.d., 9).

The effect of SAPs is different on men and women but tragic regardless. They bring new levels of anxiety into millions of lives by generating more insecure, part-time, or informal sector jobs—never mind completely exploitative working conditions, since with the increase in privatization, the rights of labor get buried because labor laws are not applicable in the special export zones created by the government. Men come under extraordinary psychological strain as they are required to earn more and more to make ends meet. The experience of Latin America shows that ultimately SAPs push men into committing crimes and becoming prey to various addictions (a number of plays by Lok Rehas address this issue in the context of Pakistani society). Cuts in social services—poor to begin with—place an even greater burden on women, who have to juggle the increased demands of the workplace and home when the already inadequate level of state support has been further reduced (Punjab Lok Sujag n.d., 9).

### **Globalization, Patriarchal Islam, and Theater Work for Women’s Rights**

The effects of economic restructuring policies, which are in turn linked to increased industrialization, have been detrimental to society as a whole but, as many of the plays performed over the last several decades by Pakistani alternative/street theater groups attest, women—in both urban and rural communities—have emerged as a triply oppressed group within the unholy alliance that has been formed between this type of postmodern capitalist globalization with patriarchal ideology and religious Islamic extremism. As Humaira Akhter points out in her essay “Women, Paid Work, Controls, and Resistance,” cultural and social controls—sanctioned by religious/patriarchal ideology—that are used within the “private” or domestic sphere to control or limit women’s access to decision making by “forcing them to seek permission for making any kind of purchases (decisions),” bleeds over into the public sphere of paid labor by “imposing the need on women workers to follow some kind of seclusion, that is *pardah*” (Akhter 1995, 18). Thus, for instance, women are expected by their families to join segregated factories and workplaces. This practice suits the profit-driven multinational companies and other employers, since the women can be well controlled by male overseers, who also hold the threat of sexual harassment over them as a tool of enforcing docility. While

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multinationals, which tend to own pharmaceutical, cosmetic, and electronics companies, show some observance of labor laws, on the whole “they pursue practices which circumvent provisions available to women workers, and deny them their rights . . . [such as] denial of promotion on their being working mothers . . . [and denial of] maternity leave” (Akhter 1995, 26). Thus, segregation of women in the public work world “merely forces women to avoid contact with men and limits their options to exercise their rights as workers” (18).

In these depressing circumstances, what, one might ask, can women do to resist such patriarchal/cultural (religious)/class-system controls? Again, Humaira Akhter suggests:

The alternatives available to women workers, in the absence of democratic systems and structures in factories or labor unions, is to find external support for their struggle and strife. One option is to find alternative forms of organizations within the factory and/or connecting with other platforms which already exist. In this way, they will be able to evolve a more democratic system which will become a viable alternative for them to resist and overcome problems at work.” (1995, 55)

Ms. Akhtar’s analysis does not here point out the need to link women’s resistance to unjust capitalist work conditions with a resistance to “at-home” labor conditions that reproduce the same exploitation of women’s work, never mind controlling their bodies and minds. Thus, it is clear that patriarchal ideology has to be seen in relation to capitalism and as both supporting and supported by a religious ideology that seeks to keep women in purdah—bondage.

Nevertheless, Akhter’s point, generally taken, that for resistance to become a reality in women’s life, they must build alliances (“connecting with other platforms which already exist”) is a clear rallying cry for the women’s movement of Pakistan, which entered its contemporary phase after 1977, when General Zia-ul-Haque’s undemocratic military regime came to power and began systematically singling out women as a target group for attack. A series of highly discriminatory laws (called the Hudood Ordinances) were passed that totally disregarded women’s status not only as women but as human beings. This appalling state of affairs led women (it would be more accurate to say upper-middle-class urban women) to realize that they would have to fight for their rights themselves. The need was to educate each other and join hands in a struggle for their rights not only in response to this current barbarism but also to overcome centuries-old inequalities and prejudices born of a patriarchal class system.

It was in response to Zia-ul-Haque’s “Islamization” policies—which were aided and abetted by Western (specifically U.S.) aid to counter the

USSR's "Communist" influence in neighboring Afghanistan—that the women's movement in Pakistan was born, with several different groups and organizations being formed all over the country.<sup>4</sup> Tehrik-I-Niswan (T-I-N) was one such, founded in Karachi, in the province of Sindh in 1980. It was initially founded to help organize women textile workers in the slum area of Liyari in Karachi into a union. In 1981, they performed a play for an all-women audience in this economically depressed neighborhood. "The response to this play was so encouraging," according to Sheema Kermani, founder of the organization, "that we decided to adopt theatre as our vehicle of expression" (Kermani 1993).

Within a decade and a half of its formation, T-I-N had staged more than a hundred performances of twenty different productions. In a sense, it became, like other "alternative" theater groups formed around the same time, a cultural wing of the women's movement in Pakistan. Many of the plays that T-I-N has performed can be termed "mobile" or "street" theater: plays of short duration and simple sets and props, performed free of cost in low-income areas in front of largely illiterate audiences drawn either from industrial workers or people doing small jobs in various sectors and focusing on issues and problems drawn from their lives. Kermani describes this facet of their work in more detail:

We work as a mobile unit which goes and performs in various places at the invitation of NGOs and other organizations working there. We try to work closely with these NGOs and often develop the material of the play in conjunction with them. The plays are usually followed by discussions with members of the audience.

One of the organisations we have worked with, runs a mobile dispensary in rural areas. Another institution operates among women factory workers, providing them legal and medical aid. . . .

We have discovered through our experiences that such theatre can become an alternative to formal education. For a people who have been suppressed, the ability to speak up, to express one's feelings, has been stunted, especially among women. A play therefore becomes a highly vital mode of communication—contemporary events and issues, and social realities, become take-off points as they are discussed and portrayed through our mobile theatre. A process starts—a process of dialogue, debate, questioning, and then looking for alternatives and solutions. At one performance, an old man got up and said, "You have portrayed the story of my daughter—if your character could fight against her oppression and win, so should my daughter." What a sense of achievement we felt. Our faith in the effectiveness of our mobile theatre was fortified. (Kermani 1993)

If even a few women, according to Kermani, could discover, with the aid of their theatrical interventions, their own strengths and capacities and embark on a process of struggle, "what more would T-I-N Mobile The-

atre want?” Here then is one example of the kind of “alliance-building” work that includes the notion of “consciousness-raising” popularized by the U.S. women’s movement of the 1960s and 1970s, alluded to as one possible “resistance” strategy by Humaira Akhtar in her essay on women factory workers.

### *Aurat*

Certainly, the play I witnessed performed by T-I-N on the occasion of International Women’s Day, though performed a day earlier on 7 March 1997, highlighted the themes of injustice, maltreatment, and discrimination against women in every area and stage of life. The play was entitled *Aurat ki kahani* (A woman’s story) and was performed at a community hall in Dastagir Colony, a socioeconomically depressed area of Karachi. An adaptation of Indian playwright/activist Safdar Hashmi’s *Aurat* (Woman), the play provides glimpses of various stages in the life of the daughter of a poor laborer. As a child, she is denied the right to an education, as her poor and miserable father can barely afford to send his son to school—and, of course, the son has priority. Even minor privileges like going out of the house and playing with the neighborhood children are forbidden to her. She only performs household chores and bears the brunt of being a girl child and a sister.

As a young adult, she is subjected to humiliation and embarrassment during the matchmaking process—suitors come to look her over as a commodity to be bought or rejected. Once she does get married, she faces greater difficulties as the wife of a poor mill worker.

At the time of leaving her father’s house, she is told by her parents to always obey her parents-in-law and to always sacrifice her own desires and happiness for the sake of her husband and his family (this is the joint-family system, still very prevalent in the lower socioeconomic classes and sometimes even in middle and richer classes). She is told in no uncertain terms that she is to leave her marital home—her *susraal*—only after her death.

In her *susraal*, she is quickly turned into a workhorse, a machine: performing housework, bearing and raising children one after another, and supplementing her husband’s meager income by grinding wheat at home. This labor is not enough; before long, she has become an ailing woman old before her time, working in a garment factory and facing the daily humiliation of harassment and exploitation by her boss. She puts up with this humiliation because she cannot afford to leave the job—after her husband’s death, she becomes the entire family’s sole breadwinner—

although, as Akhter's article had pointed out, she still needs to seek permission of her in-laws for even the smallest personal purchase.

The play depicts precisely and with great emotional effect the triple constraints—religion, patriarchy, and capitalism—that Akhter's essay had pointed to—working hand in glove to crush the female protagonist of this play. The play goes on to depict the problems and difficulties a poor woman must face in her efforts to seek education and employment. The “eve-teasing and sexual harassment so common on streets and at work places” (Mehdi 1993) make her existence as difficult in the public sphere as it is in the private.

Nevertheless, toward the end of the play, the nameless Everywoman—whose life symbolizes the everyday real struggles of most women, not just in this audience but in the majority of Pakistani society—finally realizes that she can no longer suffer in silence and raises her voice against injustice and exploitation of women everywhere. This is perhaps the most effective dramatic moment in the play: each of the stages of the protagonist's life are presented through highly stylized, repetitive movements by Kermani, whose training as a classical dancer comes in very useful in this particular role. This final moment is realized by a silent scream, accompanied by the radically symbolic gesture of the protagonist throwing off her *dupatta*—the chador-like long scarf most Pakistani women are enjoined by Islamic ideology to drape over their heads and/or bosoms as a gesture of female modesty and purity.

The audience that particular day consisted of women of all ages, including some preteenaged girls, and several young men as well. They all seemed to have enjoyed “the show”—since this type of entertainment is not a common occurrence in this sort of neighborhood. In response to my questions, even the men—and certainly the women—agreed that what they had witnessed reminded them of situations that were very similar to their own lives. (The same finding had been reported by journalist Samina Mehdi (1993) after she witnessed a performance of this play in another low-income area of Karachi called Korangi.) It is interesting to note that even women of Christian communities in Pakistan (Dastagir Colony, where this play was performed, is 90 percent Christian) are subjected to the constraints of Islamist ideology when it comes to ideals of “modest” feminine behavior and “proper” dress. A young woman of the area who works as a community activist and schoolteacher told us afterward in the privacy of her parents' two-room house where she lives that she has to endure catcalls and other demeaning insults from young men she encounters daily on her way to work. She admitted that even though her father has “agreed” to her working, he is not happy about it and imposes all manner of curfews and other restrictions on her social life.

Meanwhile, the plays *Dukhini* and *Jhalli kithay jaavey* (Where should the madwoman go?), written by Ajoka Theater group's in-house playwright, Shahid Mehmood Nadeem, and directed by his wife, Madeeha Gauhar (*Dukhini*, which means "the suffering one," was codirected with a Bangladeshi female director), address head-on the notion of complicity that all sectors of society share at this particular historical moment of globalization in perpetuating the cycle of injustice and violence against women.

### *Dukhini*

In terms of plot, theme, and location, *Dukhini* and *Jhalli* are very different. The former play, written and performed almost ten years after *Jhalli*, its first performance held on an outdoor stage on the lawns of the Goethe Institute of Lahore during September of 1997, is about the trafficking of Bangladeshi women in Pakistan, who are "sold off" in their native villages by their fathers or other male guardians to men "believed" to be bona fide suitors-in-marriage. These hapless women are in turn sold off by men they thought were their husbands and protectors to a pimp, who brings them with other similarly unfortunate women across India's border and into Pakistan, either to be used as prostitutes by the pimp himself or else sold off by him to a high-paying customer who then makes such a woman his "wife," but in reality uses and abuses her as his fancy pleases, keeping her a virtual slave and prisoner in his household—where she is often offered up to his male friends, and in some cases, grown sons, as a sexual "treat."

While criminal trafficking and prostitution are age-old phenomena, a recent report by the International Labor Organization notes alarmingly that "forced labor slavery and criminal trafficking in people are *increasing globally, with women and children most at risk*" (*New York Times* 2001; my emphasis). Cecilia Ng (2000), focusing on South Asia in particular, notes in her report for the ILO, "Globalization and Women," that "prostitution, forced prostitution, trafficking in women and children with associated violence and harassment have become a major concern in the region," thus prompting her to ask, "How do we explain these phenomena?" Her hypothesis, that as men lose jobs under the "casualization of labor" enforced by globalization policies, their sense of masculinity becomes increasingly threatened, leading to a concomitant escalation in violence against women, bears some attention. While Ng correctly points to the possible links between increasing job insecurity for men (especially in the Third World) under the new world order and increased gender violence

and a resultant strengthening of patriarchy, Agnes Khoo, another labor activist and researcher of South and Southeast Asia, further underscores the ways in which such a strengthening of patriarchy feeds into the needs of postmodern capitalism. She writes:

The re-structured economies in most parts of Asia have resulted in a permanent pool of no small number of reserve labour force, majority of whom are women. This reserve labour pool will ensure that labour cost is kept the lowest, at all times, in favour of International Capitalist Production and Capital Accumulation. Thus, in this new millennium, labour, especially women's labour, will be kept insecure, unprotected and flexible . . . creat[ing], ultimately, a class of impoverished, "globalized" workers that are not protected by their State nor by the governments in the countries/areas where they are working. (Khoo 2000, 2)

Indeed, such a scenario is the life story of the title character, Dukhini, as well as of the Bangladeshi women who visit her grave in a graveyard in Karachi that provides the somber stage setting for the play (unlike *Aurat*, which I saw performed in a community center hall, sans stage or props or lights, *Dukhini* has been performed mostly on proscenium stages in theater halls). Dukhini—as the nameless and dead protagonist of the play comes to be called by women in a similar predicament to hers, who only “knew of her” when she was alive but had never communicated with her, and who now come to visit her grave—becomes the catalyst for hope and for the plot itself through the grisly manner of her death. The audience learns early on that she had committed suicide, not quietly and invisibly within the confines of her master's house but publicly and dramatically by dousing herself with gasoline and setting herself on fire in the market square where she was being led by her so-called husband. Her death by fire and the ensuing postmortem—which reveals chain marks on her ankles and wrists—turns her into a cause célèbre for a feminist NGO worker back in Bangladesh who shows up on the doorsteps of families in Bangladeshi villages whence many women like Dukhini come in order to “reveal the horrors” being inflicted on their daughters and sisters, who have become part of the “undocumented” workers, the “insecure, unprotected and flexible” labor force of globalized migrant workers who, being “illegal” (their passports remain in the possession of their husbands or pimps), do not even exist in the eyes of the law. Immolating herself in a public square becomes, under such circumstances, Dukhini's act to render herself visible from behind the screen of statelessness being imposed on migrant female subjects in particular in an age of postmodern globalization.

It is interesting to note that on subsequent performances of *Dukhini* in

theater halls around Dacca and Chittagong in October 1997, in Tagore Hall in Chandigarh and Gorky Sadan in Calcutta, and in Rashtrya Hall in Khatmandu (Nepal) and BC Pal Hall in New Delhi (India) in June and July 2000, diverse audiences (totaling approximately 10,000 people, according to Shahid Nadeem) commented, both verbally and on questionnaires distributed by Ajoka, on the links they saw between the women's degradation and economic hardships that many connected to the increasing gap between rich and poor countries, forcing vast numbers of women—and men—into becoming “stateless” (and hence ever-more-exploited) labor in search of a better life.

Meanwhile, the NGO officer in the play, waving her banner of human rights, expects that the poor “ignorant” relatives of other Dukhinis-in-the-making will be shocked but grateful to her for the “truth” and, consequently, help her by signing a petition she can use to pressure the governments of both Bangladesh and Pakistan to recognize the sad state of affairs and end these women's exploitation by allowing them to return “home.” However, it is this NGO officer who is in for a shock. The various relatives she petitions at first refuse to believe her stories—each insisting that his or her daughter/sister has gone overseas to earn her keep “respectably,” working as a bona fide maid in someone's home or in a factory or is “happily married”: all situations that allow these women to send home regular money orders, which are helping the families to pay off their debts to moneylenders or landlords, or which enable them simply to survive in an economic world order in which “the development model being promoted globally is producing inequality and environmental degradation” (according to various UNDP Development Reports, 1996–99, cited in Ng 2000) and where the richest 20 percent of the world commands 85 percent of the world's income, while the poorest 40 percent (Bangladesh being included) owns only 1.4 percent of the same income (Ng 2000). The NGO officer keeps insisting that that these women are not happy, that she wants to help them and their families by “reuniting” them—until finally the relatives raise questions to which she has no answers:

**Relative 1:** If you succeed in bringing them back, will you be able to get them jobs?

**Relative 2:** Will you be able to arrange their marriages and pay for them?

**Relative 3:** Will you be able to get them decent housing?

And, of course, there's the rub, isn't it? The question being raised here by Nadeem is a fundamental one for these so-called postmodern times, in which the majority of the world's population continues to suffer under new conditions of capitalist oppression arising out of export-ori-

ented industrialization, the opening of markets, and trade liberalization, as a result of which developing countries must not only ensure cheap labor but flexible labor as well—which essentially means doing away with labor rights and protective legislation, and this of course supports the exploitation of the labor force, particularly the new labor force: women and children. This situation is supported by the state when it maintains silence in the face of such exploitative practices.

Thus, in recent decades, the nongovernmental sector has grown in Third World nations in response to the abdication of responsibility toward its citizens demonstrated by the state when it supports SAPs that result in the kind of economic restructuring that creates stress and misery for the poor majority. These local NGOs have, over time, become lucrative “mini-industries,” drawing in billions of dollars in foreign (Western) aid to set up resource centers that provide better employment to many and that research and call attention to the plight of women and other underprivileged minorities in a state such as Pakistan or Bangladesh—but whose agendas of social concerns, such as population control, for example, are often determined by their foreign donors.

While the debate around NGOs as being “good” or bad” for these countries is an ongoing one with arguments to be made on both sides,<sup>5</sup> the issue being raised in the play is really more simple: the NGO officer represents an organization with a well-meaning intention—which is, perhaps, the basic flaw in the NGO ideology. In this particular case, these women are correctly—and humanely—perceived as having been mistreated by being turned into prostitutes against their wills in a foreign country; the solution posed is: If we can publicize their maltreatment and get government and nongovernment support and funding to bring them back “home” to their own country to be reunited with their loving families, all will be well. Unfortunately, as the relatives of these women point out, such a “solution” would be, at best, a Band-Aid approach to deep structural problems of global inequality and oppression.

Tragically, even the rest of the Bangladeshi women in the play, leading lives of bondage and prostitution in Pakistan, come to a similar conclusion as their kinsfolk “back home.” Galvanized into taking action by Dukhini’s brave act, the three women who start frequenting her gravesite after her death decide to escape their horrible lives and return to their beloved homeland and families. However, as they are plotting their escape, the pimp who “owns” them arrives on the scene and very cleverly makes them see the foolishness of their desire: they have neither money nor passports nor visas (as usual, the men in charge of them either smuggled them illegally across borders or procured false papers—in any case, the women remain powerless). How do they expect to make the journey back,

fifteen hundred miles across three national borders (Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh)? Bachoo the pimp convinces them that he will “look after them” by delivering them from their present misery and taking them to the “promised land” beyond the seas—the oil-rich Gulf states holding the lure of untold riches. Pathetically, the women are excited by Bachoo’s new scheme, trusting him once again with their lives. Just a few scenes earlier, he had threatened one of them when she refused to leave the gravesite one night to go and service a client by letting her know in no uncertain terms that he had even the state’s law on his side to make her comply with his wishes. If she refused to listen to him, he would bring a policeman to the scene and get her booked under the Hudood Ordinance—specifically, the law of *zina* passed by Zia’s government in the late 1970s in which a single woman could, with impunity, be labeled a “whore” or an “adulteress” by her husband or even an unrelated man. Then, because under the law of evidence (also passed under the Hudood Ordinance), her testimony would be regarded as equal to only half of a man’s, she would be automatically thrown in jail, there to be further abused with impunity by male police officers and wardens. Thus, what choice do these poor women have but to believe in their man, their husband, their pimp? Once again, we see how the global economic system in this so-called post-modern world works in cahoots with religious fundamentalism and patriarchal ideology to keep women in a constant state of servitude—less euphemistically known as prostitution.

*Jhalli*

In her essay on rural women of Pakistan, Jaweria Khalid observes:

It appears that technology has ambiguous effects on women; for example, machines tend to displace labour and women are among the first to be laid off in such processes. Also, it seems to us that *modernization, as currently understood and promoted by national and international agencies, tends to increase the burden on women physically, emotionally and psychologically.* (Khalid 1995, 65; my emphasis)

One of the effects of capitalist trends in agriculture has been a decrease in the number of households in a village due to migration, with labor being displaced by machines. Often, those households remaining become richer due to increased ownership of land—but these are the landowning feudal families to begin with, who just become better off under the “post”-modern system. These landlords, now even more powerful than before, prefer to give their lands on lease at increasingly higher

prices to the peasants who cultivate the land and who frequently cannot produce enough lease money and hence end up having to sell valuables and livestock—with the result that their living standard falls under this new leasing system. Small owners of land, to avoid a similar fate, have also started leasing out their land, which in turn has given rise to the trend of the men in these families adopting other occupations.

As a result, a considerable number of males have gone out of the village or country to earn a living. They send foreign remittances, which have increased the family income and inflow of consumer goods. But this again has a negative effect on women. Now there is a triple burden on women which includes the responsibility of children, household chores and work on the farm. They also suffer from loneliness and are emotionally deprived. This has very negative effects on their well-being. (Khalid 1995, 63)

In Ajoka's *Jhalli kithay jaavey*, (Where should the madwoman go?), the plight of the female protagonist—Jhalli—certainly bears out the truth of Khalid's analysis. However, we also see that certain women suffer more than others under these changed circumstances. For instance, the mother-and sister-in-law of the household into which Jhalli comes as a newlywed are desirous of obtaining the material satisfaction of consumer goods and gold jewelry they know they can have access to once Gumman (their respective son and brother and now Jhalli's husband) begins his job overseas in Dubai. They turn the force of their psychic, emotional, and spiritual alienation (caused at least partially by the onslaught of global capitalist consumerism encouraged by so-called modernization and manifest especially in the dramatic increase in equipment such as TVs, VCRs, refrigerators, and freezers bought and sent back home by workers who migrated to various UAE countries, starting in the 1970s with the oil boom) into mechanisms of control over Gumman and his bride. Domestic patriarchal ideology, which dictates that a woman entering her *susraal* (husband's household) push aside her own needs and desires for the sake of her husband and his family, becomes intertwined with the postmodern consumerist desires of her in-laws to deprive Jhalli of her husband's company for years on end, while she must single-handedly bear the burden of cooking, cleaning, and caring for the few farm animals left—never mind producing and caring for an infant. Gumman, her husband, is also victimized by the dehumanization of his labor (he is no more than a machine for his employers and treated accordingly) as well as by the insatiable lust for material goods that infects his family and leads to their insistence that he not return from Dubai to be with his wife and newborn baby daughter. Poor Jhalli continues to suffer in silence, the only source of human comfort and joy in her life now being the baby. When the baby dies due to her

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a woman who  
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status as a human  
being both inside  
and outside the  
domestic sphere.

in-laws’ uncaring attitude, medical ignorance, and resultant malnutrition, Jhalli loses her mind and goes “mad.”

Interestingly, it is her “madness” that allows Jhalli to resist the dehumanizing treatment she has received as a result of the changing trends within traditional village society which, coupled with the worst of the old patriarchal ways, have created pressures on young women too great to bear. Her madness, however, now leads to her refusal to do any housework or to conform to any notions of female propriety—she lashes out violently against anyone coming near her to tell her what to do. Her frightened in-laws chain her to a wall in one of the outhouses where the goats and cows are tethered and bring in one type of religious leader after another to try to “cure” her of her madness. Once again, the unholy trinity of postmodern capitalism, religious obscurantism, and patriarchy is formed to try to produce the perfect consumer: a woman who remains passive in the face of ideologies that seek to “contain” and degrade her status as a human being both inside and outside the domestic sphere, yet whose material desires force her man into servitude of global capitalism—the perfect examples of such a woman being the mother-in-law and the sister-in-law. The Jhallis who resist must be beaten into submission by the force of this triad. Yet, the Jhalli/madwoman of this play proves amazingly resistant to the power of these ideologies. Even religious clerics and local mystics fail to “cure” her. Interestingly, the final recourse the patriarchal family resorts to is a symbol par excellence of modern Western medicine: the psychiatric hospital. And indeed, the play ends with Jhalli being incarcerated in a mental hospital—no exit in sight. Following Jhalli’s fate, the audience enters the bleak prison of postmodernity.

Where do we go from here?<sup>6</sup>

*Saar and Anherey da pandh*

I would like to conclude with a brief discussion of two of Punjab Lok Rehas’s plays, *Saar* (Event) and *Anherey da pandh* (Way of darkness). Taken together, they suggest, in their thematic concerns as well as their styles of presentation, the intertwining of issues of women’s oppression within a “traditionalist/fundamentalist” model, with issues of unemployment, drug addiction, and other “illnesses” of the postmodern age. These, in turn, are linked to increasing debt and impoverishment of Third World countries like Pakistan brought on by SAP policies of international lending agencies such as the IMF and the World Bank under the capitalist “world order.” The NGO movement—began to counter such influence on the state level—has, in some ways, ended up becoming an extension of foreign “interference” and control through its indebtedness to international

donors based in Europe and North America. This is why Lok Rehas has, on principle, refused to accept funding from any NGO agencies, preferring to remain a volunteer organization.

Their play *Saar*, first presented outdoors on the concrete “lawn” outside the Alhamra Arts Auditorium for International Women’s Day 1997, was in part inspired by the real-life case of Saima, a young twenty-two-year-old woman who wished to marry a man of her choice—a right granted her, as an adult woman, by Islamic law.<sup>7</sup> Yet, due to the prevalence of obscurantist interpretations encouraged and rampant in the society at large and in the courts since Zia-ul-Haque’s regime of the 1970s, Saima’s father brought a case against his daughter alleging that she needed a *wali*’s permission to marry—a *wali* being the term for male guardian. Even though the court ultimately ruled in Saima’s favor, she ended up having to seek asylum in a women’s shelter in Lahore, and later she had to be “disappeared” from Pakistani society along with her husband—for fear of being killed by her father and brothers should she and her husband ever be caught by them. The play, with innovative use made of bodies and songs, shows the plight of a woman in similar circumstances as Saima; the shelter she gets to is raided by the police and her father and brother (the latter wearing a skullcap as symbol of his extreme piety and religiosity), and the woman is “caught” by them.

In an earlier version of the play, which I saw being rehearsed, the link between religious conservatism and capitalist oppression had been made through the postmodern stylistic device of pastiche—that is, through the play’s seemingly disjointed narratives that threaten a “unitary” effect associated with realism. One of these is the appearance of the young woman’s brother in an early scene as a drug addict alternately begging and threatening his sister to give him money for his habit—the threat being that he will reveal her love affair and intention to marry her beloved to their father. It also becomes clear through a conversation between the siblings that the brother’s drug problems are connected to his psychological stress at being jobless—the latter itself a result of global economic and political policies arising out of postmodern capitalist ideology and praxis. The audience also comes to see—with the help of the narrative device of a singing chorus of actors who take on various roles in the short one-act play and then comment on the hypocrisy of the characters they portray through snatches of songs sung chorus-fashion, based on recognizable folk melodies—that what lies behind the father’s religiosity (which he feigns to get the law on his side) is crass material greed; he wishes to prevent his daughter’s marriage to a man of her choice only because the latter is not wealthy and therefore cannot enhance the status of their family or add to its “capital” in any way.

These connections between patriarchy, religion, and global capitalism

are even more clearly presented in *Anherey da pandh*—to show not just their oppressive effects on women but (in keeping with Lok Rehas’s own Marxist ideology) on men as well. For instance, the only woman in the play (which juxtaposes, pastiche-style, urban scenes from a tea stall-style café with those at a bus stop), named Zareena, is a working-class woman who holds a secretarial job at a local firm; though she complains about the lack of male involvement in the women’s movement (“How many men came to the procession against the Law of Evidence? Was it only our concern? . . . It is we who bear lathi charge [beating by sticks at the hands of police]. It is we who are abused.”), she realizes by the end of the play how she, too, has bought into aspects of the patriarchal world class system’s ideology.

The young man she thinks she is in love with, Jamil, has a master’s degree but has been looking for employment for months without success. He has been doing the “right” thing all his life—studying, getting the degrees, and now applying for job after job—yet meeting only frustration as jobs get handed to those with “influence”: fathers, uncles, brothers, or friends in high places. Jamil has no “influence,” he is an ordinary man, doing what society tells him he must do in order to become “successful.” In this, he has been encouraged by Zareena, who keeps reassuring him he will find a job soon. Waiting at the bus stop for a bus that never arrives, making him late for a job interview that never would have yielded anything anyway, becomes a metaphor for Jamil—and by extension, all citizens of a postmodern world, where modernity has yielded unequal results: benefits for a few, untold misery for others. When Jamil realizes that even if the bus were to “come now,” it would be of “no use,” and that therefore, “some other method should be tried,” Zareena becomes confused by his train of thought; yet when he departs abruptly, saying, “I cannot live like this any longer” and accuses her of having had a shallow relationship with him, based only on the fact of his having the credentials of an M.A. degree, Zareena admits to herself: “Maybe I am trapped in a whirl. Neither am I able to fly, nor are my feet planted firmly on the ground. Jamil is right. I wanted to come out of my pale and routine life and wanted to use him as a step. I had a hope, that his degree would one day make him a big officer, and then, with him, my life also would begin anew.”

Here we see how effective the collusion between patriarchal ideology and capitalism has been in getting a woman, a working feminist, to internalize the conditions of her own oppression—and even to desire them as a solution (“with him, my life also would begin anew”) to the alienation (“pale and routine life”) experienced by the individual (in this case a woman) in a postmodern world. While it is certainly true that a woman’s fate of alienation and psychological and material stress is experienced dif-

ferently (and in most cases in a more extreme fashion) than a man's—and we see this in the scene where Zareena, awaiting the bus, is sexually harassed by a man in a car as well as in the daily harassment she must face by her boss—the play shows us through the pathetic lives of its mostly male characters how all citizens of Third World debtor countries like Pakistan are victims of the new world order. As the café owner, Abdul Shakoor, remarks: “Yes, yes. People like us pass their lives waiting. Awaiting the recovery of debts. Waiting for the good times to come. Awaiting prosperity. And when the time comes, the death angel is there, to take life away.” A client of Shakoor agrees with his assessment: “We should stand on our own feet. Just see, we have been getting loans for the past 37 years, but what has happened? Instead of any progress, we are decaying. . . . If there is a flood, they ask for loans. If there is a cyclone, ‘give us a loan.’” Shakoor interrupts his client to chime in: “And if there isn't any such thing, even then, give us a loan, because the Afghans have come. People have nothing to eat, but our hospitality is not letting us breathe. It is in the papers . . . four more Afghans have been caught for drug trafficking.” And of course Jamil, the unemployed M.A., concurs. “Loans also, we don't get in full amount. Half disappear in files, the other half in Honda Accords, and people like us, go on foot.”

In this exchange, we see the disillusionment of the people of Pakistan, the ordinary folk, who have been deprived of the means to live even their humble lives with a modicum of pride and sense of community. It is this deprivation that feeds their resentment against the Afghan refugees—and they are astute enough to realize that the “Afghan crisis,” which has led to their society being flooded with arms and drugs the Afghans bring in with them, has been created by a collusion of interests between the ruling military elite and the U.S. government, which is funneling aid to keep the junta in power as a buffer against the influence of the Soviet Union. International lending practices, thus aided and abetted by the West, have only enriched the corrupt elites who, in turn, have begun to use religion as a means of legitimizing their rule, leaving the people to rot materially, psychically, and spiritually.<sup>8</sup>

The only way to break this cycle of oppression arising out of the unholy alliance of capitalism, patriarchy, and religiosity—an alliance crushing both women and working-class men—is envisioned, at least in terms of this play as well as in the ending of *Saar*, through collective action born of awareness. At the end of *Saar*, the women of the shelter home rise up after having been beaten down by the men representing societal forces of control (the mullah or cleric, the policeman, the father, and the brother) and form a human circle of strength, all the while singing: “We will fight together for each other, even though fighting could

mean death. But it is only through struggling together that we will come eventually to live.” And, at the conclusion of *Anherey da pandh*, we see all the actors come together as a chorus, singing of collective struggle as being the only way out of (post)modern alienation.

*Chorus.* Every stream and brook will become a sea  
Society will get purified  
a new humanity will emerge to plough the seeds of creativity  
towards new paths and a new world.  
We hold each other’s arms  
Sing the song of joy  
on the way toward happiness  
on the way toward happiness.

## Conclusion

On International Women’s Day 1997, I witnessed *Saar* being performed not just in the courtyard outside the Alhamra Arts Council, which was an “official” performance that took place during a full-day event organized by various women’s NGOs based in Lahore, but also, later in the evening, in a community center located in an impoverished Christian neighborhood on the outskirts of the city. There—as in the Karachi slum of Dastagir where I had earlier witnessed the performance of *Aurat* by Tehrik-I-Niswan—both during and after the performance, I noticed an intense involvement on the part of the audience, which had some men in it but consisted mainly of women of all ages, including preadolescent girls.<sup>9</sup>

After the play was over, there was a Q & A period conducted by Huma Safdar, one of the women activists of Lok Rehas, who has codirected several of their plays, including this one. The women in the audience participated vigorously in the discussion and despite the presence of men, came out strongly voicing their opposition to the way the main female character in the play is treated.<sup>10</sup>

They were well aware of the Saima case that had just unfolded in the courts and upon which the play was based, and while these were Christian women to whom Shariah law would not apply, nevertheless, the heavily patriarchal ruling ideology has the same effect on these women’s lives as it did on Saima’s. This is a clear instance in which we see the deep intertwining of religion with patriarchy, in which both together become instruments of control over women’s minds and bodies. Yet, in terms of this particular case and its ramifications, I realized that women like me and Huma Safdar, belonging to “liberal” families of a different socioeconomic background that afforded us the privilege of education and physical and

social mobility, would not have to face these types of situations. I recognized, then, that my ability to write about an unjust system is itself predicated on my being advantaged by the same system: I am a beneficiary of the capitalist class system, even as I recognize its injustice and remain fearful that its collusion with patriarchy and religious obscurantism can damage me in the long run. Thus, my question has now become not what can I do for these women, but what can we do together to effect change that will be beneficial to us all? That night, I was certainly humbled by what I saw at the end: a handful of women took over the stage after Huma was done with the Q & A period, and one of them, an elderly woman with a white muslin *dupatta* draped across her head and chest, took hold of the tablas belonging to one of the male performers and started playing them and singing; the rest joined in, and soon it seemed as if all the women were singing away at the top of their voices. It was an amazing sight: so many women asserting their presence through song, in itself not something that is usually publicly staged in front of strangers since it goes against the traditional concept of *purdah*. But what was truly remarkable to me was seeing a woman playing the tabla—an instrument that is hardly ever played by a woman, because its rhythms are considered too difficult and complicated for a woman to master! And here she was—playing away as though her life depended on it. And I guess, in a way, it did.

As do the lives of all of us:

“A new humanity will emerge, to plough the seeds of creativity.”

Indeed, we have to find creative solutions to the burdens of a post-modernity that threatens, in its global ambitions, to collude with premodern orthodoxies to maintain, even tighten, the noose of oppression around the necks of the world’s inhabitants. The noose may be tighter for some than others, but we should make no mistake: it will crush the life force out of all of us, sooner or later, unless we can learn to perform our humanity more creatively.

## Notes

I wish to thank Paul Arthur for reading an earlier draft and offering invaluable advice.

1. For a detailed analysis and description of the Pakistani street or alternative theater movement, see my article, “Street Theatre in Pakistani Punjab: The Case of Ajoka, Lok Rehas, and the Woman Question,” first published in *TDR* 41 (fall 1997): 39–63; later reprinted in *The Pre-Occupation of Postcolonial Studies*, ed. Fawzia Afzal-Khan and Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2000).

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2. The theater work that Lok Rehas and other alternative theater groups in Pakistan do is underwritten by the ideological imperative of “theater for development” initiatives in general, which make use of daily events in the people’s lives to fashion plots and themes. As Frances Harding, writing about this type of theater in the African context, explains: “The content and personnel of Theatre for Development derive from ‘on-the-ground’ situations and embrace the logic of a Freirian-Boalian paradigm of direct fictionalising and dramatising which lead ideally to action in real life” (Harding 1998, 5).

3. Nuruzzaman n.d. asserts that “the dominance of the TNCs in the global economy is an accepted fact. The top 200 TNCs had a combined sale of US \$7.1 trillion in 1995, which is equivalent to 28.3% of the world’s gross domestic product.”

4. The women’s movement in Pakistan has, since its inception, become actively involved with the international human rights movement—an opening provided, paradoxically, by the phenomenon of globalization that, on the one hand, is responsible for the newer, more intensified forms of class and gender repression I have been outlining. Yet, at the same time, the notion of an international civil society has expanded because of the ascendance of an international human rights regime and a large variety of nonstate actors in the international arena thanks to globalization processes. That such an arena is clearly a “contested space” is pointed out by Saskia Sassen, “particularly when we consider the logic of the capital market—profitability at all costs—against that of the human rights regime.” But, as Sassen notes optimistically, “it does represent a space where women can gain visibility as individuals and as collective actors, and come out of the invisibility of aggregate membership in a nation-state” (Sassen 1998, 99). Here, then, is another level—a transnational one—of building alliances, which would allow women to subvert globalization for their own ends!

5. In their essay, “The Context of Women’s Activism,” Farida Shaheed and Sohail Akbar Warraich draw attention to the debate “on whether the development oriented NGOs which accept external funding have undermined the political activism of women” (Shaheed et al. 1998, 305.) They point out that WAF (Women’s Action Forum), the leading women’s rights organization founded during Zia-ul-Haque’s regime, “conscious of the dangers attached to funding has always refused to accept any funding from any government, bilateral or international agency as a matter of principle.” While this may be laudable on the one hand, freeing the organization from any possible outside interference or influence, it does mean that “WAF has neither full-time workers nor infrastructural facilities to undertake full-time work.” Thus, while calling attention to the blind spots and complicities of the NGO movement of the previous few decades in South Asia is a useful contribution to the general critique against the collusion of global capitalism/religion/militarism that contributes to keep women of this region oppressed, it is only fair to note that Ajoka itself, especially for this project, accepted funding from an international NGO: the Heinrich Böll Foundation. Yet, Madeeha Gauhar, artistic director of Ajoka, has defended Ajoka’s decision to accept NGO funding from time to time by asserting that her group tackles the issues that the funders pay them to base their plays on “entirely from [our] own perspective.” She also scoffs at the idea that the NGO “agenda” is dictating their choice of themes and issues by pointing out that her group “tackled those issues long before the NGOs started campaigning on them” (Gauhar 1996).

My own view is similar to Gauhar's: that is, it depends on what the NGO wants in return for its money and what its agenda is in the first place. Certainly, the Heinrich Böll agency, which funded the development and production of the bicultural and bilingual venture *Dukhini* has an appealing history/ideology, committed to "helping people help themselves" rather than turning them into dependents of foreign aid—which is what the big international lending agencies with SAP agendas tend to do. The foundation is more interested in helping underprivileged people find ways to fashion creative, indigenous solutions to their oppressive circumstances; hence, their support for the creative arts as a "development" strategy (rather than the funding of high-tech solutions that often end up creating alienation and underemployment for millions). Here is an excerpt from its policy pamphlet: "The Heinrich Böll Foundation does not support conventional development projects, i.e. projects that are . . . donor imposed and organised from the top down instead of being self-determined by the beneficiaries . . . one-dimensional instead of holistic . . . geared towards blind modernisation or repetitive development models" (Heinrich Böll Foundation 1995, 6).

The key issues that the Heinrich Böll Foundation gives priority to in funding support also show that the debate around the NGO movement is a complex one, and that it should not be automatically assumed that all NGO activity is suspect and linked to the spread of global capitalist, consumer ideology. Thus, it is important to realize that the Heinrich Böll Foundation gives priority to the following key issues: "Sustainable utilisation of resources and defense of the rights of nature . . . solidarity in the world economic order and decentralisation of supply structures . . . individual, political and social human rights . . . cultural identity and self-determination . . . the liberation of women and gender equality" (Heinrich Böll Foundation 1995, 5–6).

For a more biting critique of NGOs, see also Ahmad 2001.

6. Nadeem has pointed out (personal correspondence, June 2001) that his critique of "mental" hospitals as lacking trained personnel and proper facilities was not well received by the psychologists' organization that had initially agreed to fund the production. "They had expected that the play will promote psychological awareness in a way which will increase their clientele," writes Nadeem, but when they read the script and saw the critique against fundamentalist "faith healers" turned in their direction as well, they backed out of their funding commitment! Clearly, in the eyes of the playwright, there are atemporal similarities between certain "premodern" and "postmodern" phenomena.

7. As mentioned earlier, taking real-life events as the basis for (mostly) one-act plays is a tendency shared by virtually all of the major and minor theater groups that can be identified as part of the alternative theater movement of Pakistan. Since the main purpose of these groups (despite differing emphases) is to use theater as a tool for "conscientization" (Ajoka, for example, calls itself "a theater for social change"), it follows that most of them take current atrocities and injustices as the material around which to write and perform "issue-oriented" theater.

8. Farida Shaheed has written extensively on this interlinking of state power with religion during Zia-ul-Haque's regime and its devastating consequences on the country's populace, particularly women. She writes in "The Other Side of the Discourse: Women's Experience of Identity, Religion, and Activism in Pakistan," "The religious discourse initiated under Zia emerged against the backdrop of a

much wider crisis of national identity in which a politically illegitimate martial law regime turned, as others had, to religion (Islam) possibly as a means of containing intra-state conflict but definitely as a cloak for imposing ever more repressive and undemocratic measures and preempting opposition to these. . . . Inter-linking state power and religiosity, the regime gave currency to the latter as a key for opening the door to political power. With politicians bent on proving their 'Islamic credentials,' the ensuing battle royale for the mantle of religious leadership saw heightened sectarianism and associated violence, and deepening intolerance" (Shaheed et al. 1998, 419).

Shaheed goes on to show how women and religious minorities became easy targets of this violence and how, through a state-led offensive against women's rights via legislation and administrative directives, "attempts to restrict women's mobility and visibility and access to economic resources" were largely successful.

9. It is important to note that these theater groups are very involved in building alliances with Christian and other minority communities as part and parcel of their ideological commitment to build a "secular, just, humane and egalitarian society in Pakistan" (Nadeem and Gauhar n.d.).

10. Frances Harding describes the onstage actions of a female performer commenting on the right of young women to tertiary education in an African village in terms that shed light on the transformative potential of this type of theater for all participant-performers everywhere; the exhilaration and power of analysis expressed by the women I heard that evening as they commented on *Saar* bears out Harding's analysis in the African context: "It was a rich and rewarding experience for her [the female actor] to have a public forum in which to vent her frustration and express her opinion about long-established practice without having to compromise herself personally. At such transformative moments Theatre for Development achieves fulfillment in empowering people through their personal experience. This young woman would never have known that she had the ability to address the elders and the assembled village, nor would any other opportunity have presented itself whereby she *could* address them. The elders and all the men had been compelled to listen to her and recognize her ability and her analysis. Drama can offer a safe fictionalised context for real development" (Harding 1998, 16).

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