

## Punjabi Stage Shows and Contemporary Pakistani Theatre Some Ethnographic Notes

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### *Abstract*

*This article is a comparative analysis between popular Punjabi stage shows and contemporary serious theatre and investigates the effects of both types of theatres on our society. Through ethnographic framework we present an assessment of the content they present to the public. Stage dramas are a very vibrant form of media in the region and in Pakistan there are currently two types of theatres: the popular bawdy Punjabi stage shows and the more serious contemporary Pakistani drama. The popular Punjabi stage shows that have become quite common in the cities are very inappropriate and they have a bad effect on the public. These popular plays are in bad taste, appeal to a vulgar audience and present females as sex objects in order to attract a larger number of customers and make more money. As such they should not be considered as part of our culture. On the other hand, contemporary Pakistani drama deal with our society and usually present themes that point out faults and try to improve our social set up, values and thinking. Currently several organizations are working hard to bring back audiences to this higher class of plays which play a positive role in our culture. People are also becoming more conscious of entertainment that is good for society and condemn the popular stage shows and are patronizing contemporary Pakistani drama, even though it will still take some time for it to flourish.*

**Keywords:** Audience, Punjabi Theatre, Mental Health, Psychology, Values.

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### **Introduction**

This article is not meant to provide history of Pakistani theatre either popular or serious but it presents some ethnographic notes and comparative analysis between Punjabi popular stage shows and contemporary Urdu theatre presented in the city of Faisalabad (Punjab).<sup>1</sup> By presenting this research study we wish to clarify that no provincial bias is intended by the term Punjabi popular stage shows. This term is used only because

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<sup>1</sup> The interest in carrying out this particular research was started back in the end of year 2015 when we were invited to attend theatre play "Siachen" directed by Anwar Maqsood, presented in the auditorium of University of Agriculture in Faisalabad. Since then, we started planning to collect some ethnographic notes through observation by attending both serious theatre and Punjabi theatre whenever played particularly in the city of Faisalabad. Finally, the article in hand is a research output of that idea driven in 2015. Furthermore, another research study on the subject of the presentation of female bodies in popular Punjabi theatre and the Tiktok videos under title "The Dancing Girls" by the principal author of this study is in process of publication.

these theatres cropped up mainly in the Punjab and therefore are in this vernacular and are viewed in this province.

This research presents some ethnographic notes as well as it is a comparative study of the Punjabi popular stage shows and contemporary Pakistani theatre; the former are vulgar comedies, often without a script and interspersed with female or transgender dancing, these are also called commercial theatres and the latter are actually what can be properly qualify as drama; they cater to a higher taste, have literary value and usually point out faults in our society, such as Anwar Maqsood's play, "Siachen" which is a humourous but moving dramatic presentation where the focus on the script or content, the quality of performance and the point the playwright wishes to make.

The authors of the treatise collected visual evidences of both theaters in the city of Faisalabad (Punjab) therefore this study revolves around the theatre in this city. Further this study is aimed at the effects of both these genres on the local region as well as on the general public in the whole of our society.

Many scholars who have dealt with this subject (Khan, 2005; Farida 2015; Pamment, 2017) throw light on Punjabi popular shows that prevail in Punjab while others (Mundrawala, 2014, Rashid, 2015) have discussed the historical context and evolution of genuine theatre on both sides of the border (Pakistan and India) however the scholarship in this genre still needs to be expanded. Therefore, this study will increase not only knowledge in the field but also fill gaps in the contemporary context.

Theatre has always struggled to develop itself as an art form in Pakistan. In this part of South Asia, two styles of theatre have developed: the first is adaptations of English plays for the gentry that were performed in art councils or educational institutions, and the second is comedy or *juggat* (crude or homespun repartee) based modern drama for the masses (Bilal, 2018, p. 85). Further, the evolution of theatre in Pakistan can be examined in light of the country's complicated beginnings, social and political background, and current circumstances that may have an effect on its future development. It is difficult to understand theatre in Pakistan without considering the country's sociopolitical context and the circumstances that shaped the production of its practitioners' agendas during its complicated history (Mundrawala, 2014, p. 103). Following the argument of Mundrawala's thesis, though Pakistan socio-political history has been turbulent since its independence, but theatres and theatrical performances have always been taken up about the themes of independence and social upheaval.

Performing arts of the culture industry encompasses a vast range of art forms like puppetry, various types of music, classic and rural dances, *nataks*, plays, poetry competitions, films, TV shows, etc., etc. This study will deal with two types of theatre: one is popular Punjabi stage shows and the other contemporary Pakistani drama such as "Siachen" written by Anwar Maqsood and directed by Dawar Mehmood. Governments all over the world value these creative and cultural activities. Pakistan also purports to be proud of its cultural heritage but in actual fact, compared to what other developed and developing countries are doing today, little importance is given to it here; particularly in theatre. In fact, it can be said that the popular Punjabi stage shows started because of rapacious excise duties on cinema houses (Asghar, 2021). With the collapse of the film industries particularly of the Punjabi genre in the last two decades of 2000, the owners were hard put to keep paying duties at the old rates, so they resorted to converting their theatres to live performances and cater to this low level of taste in order to survive (Asghar, 2021). On the other hand, an interim of overdone religiosity at the governmental level discouraged the previous dramatic art traditions in Pakistan and they had to gradually find new impetus in the contemporary Pakistani drama and these are the two very different types of theatres prevailing in Pakistan. Each is having its effect on society. Because of many reasons the stage drama industry is now undervalued. Previously Pakistani drama used to show exceptional talent, creativity and high-quality script writing that made it successful both on the stage and TV. As every creative industry faces some challenges, similarly our stage drama industry. Dramas used to have a positive effect in Pakistan but now the more widespread popular stage show form is having a negative effect on the new generations. These plays are merely unprofessional productions of a low bawdy taste and are marketed catering only to the gallery. On the other hand, some groups of intellectuals with

greater sensibility started professional production companies that are rising in this field. These people are working for the revival of Pakistani theatre.

The popular stage shows are damaging the development of this creative industry. The clichéd content without depth is decreasing the demand for them and the trend is decreasing though sizeable audiences continue to frequent these plays. With this negative idiom drawing audiences there was the need to take up productions of the proper, positive expression of this creative industry. For this reason, contemporary Pakistani drama started presenting performances to promote awareness about the cultural importance of our society. That is why encouragement should be given to these genuinely talented artistes, directors and playwrights so that these plays can showcase Pakistan globally in a more positive way.

There are now more and more good productions in Pakistani stage dramas; which are gaining popularity among the more educated classes of our society and also having a good effect on our younger generation. Two institutions in Pakistan that are presenting these dramas that are reviving this industry are the 'Beaconhouse National University' and 'National Academy of Performing Arts'. There are also other groups that are contributing greatly in this regard, like the Ajoka Theatre, Alhamra Theatre, and Rafi Peer Theatre. There are also other such theatres that are now becoming more successful and the rate of viewership of the popular stage show has lost its initial impact. As Mundrawala (2014) rightly states that:

...no discussion of theatre in Pakistan is complete without acknowledging the profound role Tehrik-e-Niswan and Ajoka have played in establishing their practices as an integral part of the country's cultural landscape. Emerging from an environment of protest, both groups had from the beginning shown their own political inclination by way of their support to workers' movements and the women's movement that emerged as a reaction against Zia-ul-Haque's anti-women laws... rather than claiming to present a survey of the entire spectrum of theatre practices that existed before the inception of these two groups (p. 104).

There are many reasons why different groups of people are fond of theatre. Some prefer comedy or serious matter and others enjoy dance performances. There is no such thing as morals in today's dramas. It is all about approaching a woman. Media has objectified women in all sectors. The way they are treated and portrayed in the arena exposes her to sexual harassment (Huda and Ali, 2015, p.25). Whereas on one side there these dramas draw huge crowds, on the other there are a lot of people who think that these stage shows are vulgar and indecent. For many people stage dramas are a form of escapism.

### **Objectives of the Study**

- To delineate the psychological effects of the popular stage drama and the contemporary Pakistani theatre on our society.
- To investigate other related elements that are causing negativity in social behavior.
- To study how the contemporary theatre is struggling to counteract the ill-effects of popular stage shows.

### **Research Questions**

While collecting ethnographic notes and investigating the impacts of both genres, many questions provoked in our mind which are as follow:

- What are the factors involved in the display of inappropriate content in popular stage shows?
- How is the hierarchical social structure manipulated by these stage shows?
- Is this medium that spreads negative attitudes and behavior in the public being addressed at all and what needs to be done?

- How is contemporary theatre working to change the mindset of people in regard to these cheap stage shows?
- What steps are being taken by different institutions to improve the quality of theatre?

## Literature Review

A thorough review of the existing national and international research and analytical works on the performing arts and stage drama in Pakistani offered very little and fragmented literature. Although there are several studies that read theatre culture in south Asia particularly in India and Pakistan but only little have contributed so far in the theatre discourse of Pakistan. Out of these few readings, following relevant literature is reviewed which have aided much in developing the text for this study.

Claire Pamment, (2019) presents a thoroughly academic view in her masterful study “Comic Performance in Pakistan: The Bhānd” in which she delineates the century’s old Bhānd performance in Pakistan as well as popular Punjabi stage shows which are popular among the certain segments and youth particularly in Punjabi society. By their witty and seductive performances, the character particularly female, attract the male audience. She stressed that “by playing with the conventions of theatre and its gazing patterns, she [the female performer] knowingly uses objectification to turn the gaze back on the patriarchal structure and in doing so she asserts power” (146). In the context of this study, Pamment’s work provided a foundation in establishing relevant ethnographic text.

Asma Mundranwala’s exciting chapter on “Theatre Chronicles: Framing Theatre Narratives in Pakistan’s Sociopolitical Context” in book Mapping South Asia through Contemporary Theatre. Essays on the Theatres of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka” edited by Ashis Sengupta. Mundranwala delineates theatre accomplishments in Pakistan from post-partition to 2014. It further explores the dominance of two seminal theatres groups one is that Tehrik-e-Niswan (The Women’s Movement) in Karachi and the second is Ajoka (Of Today) both emerged in Lahore in the context of the resilience of artistic expression against the restrictive laws against literature and all art forms in the dictatorial regime of General Zia-ul-Haq during 1977-1988. Although these two groups are considered as the ‘ignition’ of the theatre discourse in Pakistan however both of them had a direct and indirect impact on the contemporary theatres which are under discussion.

Another intriguing studies “New Media, Masculinity and Mujra Dance in Pakistan” by Syeda Farida Batool (2015) introduces the readers about the live mujra dances performed in popular Punjabi stage drama which attracts larger audience through various digital media such as CDs, DVDs, Youtube and Facebook etc. Batool argues that such mujra dances and the narratives of sexual desires were primarily written and produces by male producers. The fantasies sexually empowered women often mock and ridicule male sexuality were basically emerged during religious orthodox rule of Zia-ul-Haq (1979-1988) which ultimately resulted in evolution of different methods of expressing male sexual desires.

Fawzia Afzal-Khan (1997) throws light on contemporary Pakistani drama especially she discusses the importance of street theatre in Punjab (Pakistan) in her seminal essay titled “Street Theatre in Pakistani Punjab: The Case of Ajoka, Lok Rehas, and the Woman Question”. According to her, the street theatre emerged during the repressive era of General Zia-ul-Haq’s Martial Law regime (1979-1989). She traces the connection between the Pakistan “Islamic” state and society particularly its relationship with female citizenry. She further discusses the issue of the complication of male-female relationships in the society and how gendered politics is played out. She further delineates about the representation of social stratification in street theatre.

Fauzia Saeed and Adam Nayyar’s (1991) book “Women in Folk Theatre” provides a detailed discussion on the origin of folk theatre in Punjab. This book is interesting in many ways because the authors documented

the development of theatre, biographies of the women and their sufferings to survive in a Pakistani male-dominated society.

## **Methodology**

This research is based on a qualitative research model including ethnographic field research. Ethnography is an analysis tool and procedure (one performs an ethnography) as well as a product (the ethnography is the result of this process) with the goal of cultural understanding. The ethnographer's work extends beyond simply recording events and personal information (Hoey, 2014, p. 1). Further ethnography as method in qualitative in nature in which researchers produce thick and rich interpretation over a relatively small-scale situation.

Participant observation and interview are an important ethnographic data collection method used by anthropologists and sociologists. In this context, sociologist Robert G. Burgess (1982) delineates that "... in process of 'active participant observation' the research maximizes participation to gather data, while integrating with other individuals in the social setting. In process of 'passive participant observation' the researcher interacts as little as possible with those being observed (p. 69). Therefore, following this technique, we collected data in the form of interviews from those interlocutors who have seen live Punjabi stage shows in Faisalabad. The interlocutors were contacted soon after the stage drama was over with open-ended questions while using interview protocol guides to collect the desired data. Further following research observation technique, we entered into conversation with some of the participants who were agreed to talk while physical watching both type of theatres (popular and serious) in Faisalabad city. Out of 07 theaters we have observed 02 theaters, the Minerva theatre and the Naz theater which are popular showing Punjabi stage drama while the auditorium of the University of Agriculture is often reserved for the serious dramas. We also got desired data from these three venues by our self-observation as spectators. Out of 47 (all male) interlocutors from Punjabi stage drama, and 22 (14 males and 08 females) from serious drama, we give views of only few here so that the readers may have an overall assessment of them. Furthermore, the discussion and analysis of this study is benefitted by the above-mentioned literature review.

## **Results and Discussion**

Viewers who are educated and come from good families primarily reject popular Punjabi stage shows because of its vulgarity. They feel this form of entertainment is harming our social and moral values. This opposition is causing a decline in popular stage Punjabi shows. This commercial or popular medium is lowbrow and there is no form of monitoring that can improve the quality of these commercial theatres even in their own idiom.

Quite opposite to this there are theatres that are setting examples of quality drama that including the Karachi Arts Council, NAPA (National Academy of Performing Arts), Rafi Peer theatre, Ajoka Theatre. These are bringing forward a lot of new talent. They conduct festivals to give people high minded entertainment, which can promote people's interest in literature and other elevating pursuits.

In Faisalabad city, there are also institutions that are trying to present quality productions and encouraging talent and giving people worthwhile entertainment. In 2015 Anwar Maqsood's drama 'Siachen' was staged in the main auditorium Agriculture University Faisalabad and the authors also attended the performance (Asghar, 2021). Anwar Maqsood is probably the most renowned playwright and intellectual in Pakistan today. The play, as the name suggests, is a tribute to our soldiers fighting the long-term war in the freezing and hostile environment of the Siachen glacier. It depicts how they keep themselves motivated and alert in the face of the adversities of both the climate and the enemy. Using immensely appealing and entertaining humour he suddenly brings out the poignancy and tragedy of the plight of these soldiers. The enthusiasm and the way they find entertainment, while their dangerous duty and the need to be constantly on their

guard are respectively depicted in his drama. The play was a treat and an uplifting experience for the city of Faisalabad where people only have a concept of cheap, commercial stage shows. More dramas like Siachen should be produced with the patronage of the government. They make people aware what is happening beyond their daily lives and evoke patriotism. This is entertainment that goes above normal entertainment and broadens the perspective and thinking of people and serves to improve society. One interlocutor commented after the show that:

The drama “Siachen” not only conveys a message about the patriotism but also provides a positive entertainment and comedy. Such kind of dramas if presented regularly in our society they will definitely smash that vulgar Punjabi stage shows which are destroying our youth”.<sup>2</sup>

The contemporary stage performances have gone to a whole new level and they are being successful in bringing a literate society towards the theatre again. These plays mostly try to depict some social issues and point out the faults in our society.

One of our interlocutors who belonged to the Media Club of University of Agriculture Faisalabad, had a brief discussion about contemporary serious theatre:

... that there is a great change in the minds of people these days. Now they are looking for quality entertainment and their club is playing an important role in this regard by providing people with good plays which also have a message to improve society. She said that they want to change the perception of a stage drama in Faisalabad.<sup>3</sup>

Pakistani drama, both in English and Urdu, was once very popular and well-received as an art form among the upper and middle classes in Pakistan. However, with the passing of time, public perception of plays, especially English plays, seemed to shift away from them as enjoyable entertainment. These were the production of educational institutions such as literary festival in Faisalabad or elitist organizations dedicated to maintaining a taste for high-brow culture. Aside from that, they've all but disappeared. Similarly, Urdu drama has lost much of its popularity, and most productions now depend on donations to be staged. Even so, people who understand the importance and profit of theatre, even though our culture does not normally give them due consideration, feel the need for very good dramatic plays that raise the mind or point out flaws in our society. As a result, whenever a well-known intellectual performs a good or theme-based drama, it draws large crowds, especially among the young educated youth (Asghar, 2021).

In the absence of serious high-brow drama on the national scene, Punjabi vulgar stage drama got its roots over the last couple of decades and they are spreading their vulgarity through CDs, DVDs and short clips on digital media (Batool, 2015; Asghar, 2021).

As we know that popular stage shows exploit women as an object of entertainment. The image of womanhood they present is unacceptable for a decent, civilized society. There is gender discrimination and degradation of women; the characters portrayed are negative: usually a harridan, a nosy intriguer or gossipier, a nagging wife, a pretentious modern woman or if they are appealing to look at, they are mere sex objects. And all stereotype, cliché characters.

Then there are the hoardings and big posters for the stage shows. There are very many vulgar advertisements displayed in the city of Faisalabad and most people don't bother to censure them though they are harming our society. Here there is almost complete objectification. They are shown in seductive poses, with exaggerated contours, flashy dresses and with inviting expressions on their faces in a genre that uneducated laymen associate with prostitutes and indicating loose morals (Asghar, 2021). Often the effect

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<sup>2</sup> Interlocutor 1

<sup>3</sup> Interlocutor 2

is further enhanced with the stage show having a suggestive name that is written on the hoarding. These advertisements have a negative impact on the public and denigrate females as respectable members of society. In context of women objectification in contemporary advertisement Sana Ali (2014) rightly commented that:

Sometimes the audience also condemns the objectification of women in advertising. Due to recent trends, advertising now objectifying both males and females but still women objectification is vital (p.3).

Our brains have a so-called "negativity bias". When people are shown negative images, there is an increase in neuronal firing in the brain relative to when they are shown positive images. It shows that displaying aggression and hostility on screen has a multiplier impact on negativity generation (Ashraf, 2014, p. 71). Furthermore, our socio-cultural standards for female beauty are presented in all forms of social and mass media especially when it comes to popular stage drama, one common thing that we can notice in all these images that is evident in the images below is fair complexion, which is what is idealized in our sexist culture. Another characteristic also reflects the complete lack of creativity even in this clichéd idiom; that is the associated image that these figures present is always that of local prostitutes. At least the hoardings of Punjabi films showed better execution; were not so suggestive or indecent and had more originality. But these cater to the lowest taste.

Soon after Punjabi drama show in Sabeena Theatre Faisalabad we asked one interlocutor about the cheap dances and vulgar and double entendre repartees or *juggat bazi* presented in a Punjabi drama named "Shartia Viyah" (Certified marriage). His response was as follows.

I am a frequent theatre goer. I enjoy the entertainment they present. However, the vulgar *juggat* is not meant to hurt someone. It is just comedy. People want to listen such humour as well as see sexy dances. That's what we pay for.<sup>4</sup>

It is evident by the statement of the above interlocutor that the value of entertainment even if it is presented in vulgar or seductive form is acceptable for those people who want to spend their leisure time seeing such shows to indulge their cheap, sensationalistic taste. This interlocutor was a Rickshaw driver and he was uneducated. However, we argue that the Punjabi stage shows are attended even by educated people as well. Consider the following statement of an educated interlocutor who often visited Punjabi theatre:

Punjabi drama is of course vulgar and has no meaningful content. However, we have no other alternative entertainment except this therefore I visit theatres wherever new Punjabi stage shows are presented either here in Faisalabad or in Lahore. In this age of depression, despite its vulgarity I feel pleasure at listening to the *juggat bazi*.<sup>5</sup>

The big posters showing semi-nude lead female actresses advertising Punjabi dramas are ubiquitous particularly in public spaces of Faisalabad and its suburbs. Indeed, these posters are very inappropriate to be exhibited in public, as people of all ages will be able to see them. Children have very impressionable minds and ignorant men with a low mentality will feel more convinced that women are only sex objects. In such posters, male figures are always secondary. The expressions and poses of female images are designed to encourage simplistic minded folk to fantasize inordinately and this creates an unhealthy attitude towards sex and the opposite gender apart from having a bad effect on society. This kind of objectification of women is one of the biggest evils of these popular stage shows.

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<sup>4</sup> Interlocutor 4

<sup>5</sup> Interlocutor 5

However, the gaudy make-up and enticing expressions coupled with the suggestive title of the show is a clear indication that the purpose is explicit and improper. Punjabi stage shows often follow in their posters to feature and promote the stars who are gaining popularity and display the panoply of actors and actresses they are presenting. There is a more complete depiction of female figures that are suggestive and indecent.

Most of such posters are derogative to the status of women, showing cheaply made-up woman dressed like courtesans with inviting expressions and daring poses. The total emphasis is wholesale objectification. The title of the play and lack of identification of the actress' names completes the suggestive implications. Such posters will obviously have an unhealthy impact on the viewer. Despite the fact that Punjabi stage shows are being censured more and more by society it is still surviving though it has a bad effect on the public, as its popularity decreases it panders more and more to a lower taste. But though it is reaching its nadir in quality of content and social disapproval but it will continue because there are people who will always patronize it.

## **Conclusion**

This study has compared the two types of theatres running side by side in our country affecting people in many ways. The core purpose of the study was to study these effects. It is evident from the findings of the section of discussions that people do have a taste for quality drama. Also, that there are several institutions in Pakistan that are working to revive the theatre of Pakistan and get audiences to start watching good dramas again. These presentations of contemporary Pakistani theatre dealing with themes relevant to our society and that are aimed to improve it will have a good impact on people. The demand for this type of quality theatre has started once again and is increasing. However, like all commerce the types of theatre are a matter of supply and demand. Thus, popular Punjabi stage shows still have a demand. Although these are lowbrow and decried by the educated class in society they continue to run because they cater to the taste of a certain class of people. Although they fulfill a demand of some people that doesn't mean that they are good for society. It is clear from the above discussions and comparative analysis that these stage shows lack professionalism, promote unhealthy attitudes and are too commercial. They harm society and even indirectly lead to if not just rude behavior and negative thinking but also urge some criminal actions.

## **Recommendations**

The home department of Punjab, Punjab Arts Council as well as District Management must strictly monitor these productions to ensure they remain within some standards of ethics and taste. We also recommend that the issue of the negative aspect of these stage shows of objectification of women should be addressed and like the social media is monitored this offensive tendency should be checked forthwith. Of course, the Arts Councils are struggling to play a pivotal role in promoting culture however, bureaucratic institutions tend to function on fixed lines. Creativity needs to break barriers, seek new horizons and most of all new talent.

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