

AJOKA: AN ALTERNATIVE THEATRE IN BRECHTIAN TRADITION

By:

Muhammad Saleem

Assistant Professor

Govt. Postgraduate College, Sheikhpura.

Abstract

The paper investigates the political role of Ajoka theatre of Pakistan that is programmatically devised to produce interrogative performances which enlist the audience to question the prevailing ideologies. This ideological theatre poses a challenge to the religious, social and political hegemonies that are in ascendance since 1980s when General Zia-ul-Haque imposed military rule in the country, banned political parties and usurped the basic rights of the citizens in the name of his own sense of Islamization process. In that theocratic state, life became miserable for the minorities and women were further alienated and marginalized. That process is believed to have culminated in the 'talibanisation' of Pakistani society and culture, undermining the role of fine arts, cultural production and a tolerant worldview. Hypocrisy in public sphere, philistinism, puritanism and uncritical life patterns which are closely linked with this backward looking religiosity, devoid of a broader moral sense, have been the target of Ajoka productions.

Invoking theories of Bertolt Brecht, the celebrated German playwright, the theatrical performances of Ajoka are analysed to reflect on contemporary visions about and versions of Pakistan where socio-political problems are growing in kind as well as in degree and where the widespread commercial theatre works in collusion with the existing ideologies.

Key words: Brecht; Political Theatre; Epic Theatre; Ajoka Theatre; Gestic Acting; Dialectical Theatre

Dramatic theatre that remained in vogue across the world for quite a long time was based upon Aristotle's theory of tragedy as discussed in his book *Poetics*. This Aristotelian brand of dramaturgy and theatricalization that exclusively dealt with the flux in emotional content of the audience promoted, patronized and popularized some specific concepts in the realm of drama studies, such as linear plot, subjectivity, and suspense as integral part of dramatic performances. The privileged class hero starts his heroic/tragic journey to rigorously pursue a private emotion or a personal whim (Steer, 1968, p. 636-649). A powerful game involving sheer emotions of the spectators is set on. The audience, driven by empathy, feel compelled to lose themselves in the world of the actor who in turn merges himself into the character whose role he is playing on the stage. The tightly knit plot, along with the inevitability of tragic catastrophe, keeps the

spectators in a state of trance who fix their gaze upon the denouement; minimum chance is provided to let their intellect interact with the plot of the play enacted before them. Resultantly, the dramatic theatre becomes part of the campaign carried out by the other ideological state institutions like education, media and religion etc. to favour, maintain and defend the status quo-oriented dominant ideologies of the social formation. Augusto Boal (1979) terms this disposition and practice that was pursued widely and uncritically across the globe, from ancient times down to the present under different tags and labels like Greek tragedy, classical drama, expressionism and naturalism as a disturbing act; it remained an active agent, in the form of dramatic art, as the champion of the cause and ideology of the hegemonic forces (p. 22-32). Its status quo driven policies always aimed at the continuity of the current ideological relations and hegemonic configuration in the given social formation.

Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) brought about a revolution in the theatrical practices of the modern world. Brecht's Epic theatre that afterwards evolved into dialectical theatre is commonly understood, in Hegelian terms, as an anti-current to the current of Aristotelian theatricality (Mumford, 2009, p. 80-86). Brecht, a rebellious voice in terms of form and content of the play text and acting on the stage, politicized the theatre and topicalized the thematic content of the theatrical performances to intellectually awaken the audience to the prevailing problems of the people in a specific temporal setting; his way of presenting the historicized world as a manmade but ideologically and criminally constructed phenomenon generates the possibilities as well as need of change at the hands of the audience charged in the hall in a new orientation (Brecht, 1984, p. 170-190). A Brechtian playtext/theatrical performance is the metaphor of a diphthong, a movement from one position to a totally different position; the audience primarily come to the hall to be entertained but they leave the hall as mission oriented figures to bring necessary change in the actual situations of their real life. Opposite to the Aristotelian theatricality, Brecht-theatre is, mainly, democratic in thematizing and theatricalizing the social problems of the masses.

This avant-garde in theatrical world inspired so many intellectuals, theatre practitioners and theatre critics across the globe to set and maintain the Brechtian tradition. Ajoka theatre, based in Lahore, is closely linked to the Brechtian theatre in its programme, form and social objectives. Altaf (2012) says that Nadeem, the resident playwright of Ajoka, "combines entertainment with important social messages, continuing in the tradition of Brecht" (para. 7). It was founded by Madeeha Gauhar, its Artistic Director, in the early 1980s, in the backdrop of imposition of the military regime in Pakistan at the hands of General Zia ul Haque. The army dictator, in league with regressive minded clerics, promulgated such laws in the name of Islamization in the country that it became nearly impossible for women to get any support from the law against

sexual violence and harassment. (Saigol, 2010, p.3). If a woman failed to prove that she was raped, by producing evidence of four pious men, she was deemed punishable by the law. Extramarital sex was termed as an offence against the state. What's more, persecution of minorities and widespread exploitation of the weaker sections of the society were the main features of Zia regime (Afzal-Khan, 2005). All these factors contributed to the ill-treatment meted out to the dispossessed elements in different areas. Ajoka, which literally means contemporary, reflects the very character of the theatre to topicalize its themes on the stage. No doubt, Shahid Nadeem, the playwright for Ajoka and Brecht belong to different regions, cultures and times but they share similar social conditions that force them to produce political playtexts that shake the spectators to see through the ideological dangers lurking around them. Nadeem says that the target of his political playwriting and Ajoka productions is to entertain as well as to shake up the audience intellectually by exposing them to the unjust social structures that needs to be changed (as cited in Erven, 1992, p. 161-170). It is a means to train the spectators critical thinking and responsible social beings who detect the ideological mindset behind the social ills and commonplace practices.

A lot of research was generated about Brecht's political plays and the theatrical performances that were carried out on Berlin Ensemble. John Willet got hold of the scattered writings of Brecht on his theories about the theatre and translated and compiled them in the form of a book, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*. This is an original commentary by Brecht himself on various aspects of his ideological theatre. *Gestic* acting that stands for critical enactment of a character by a demonstrator, socially constructed playtext that addresses the intellect of the audience and episodic plot are the main areas that Brecht focuses on. Meg Mumford's recent book *Bertolt Brecht* (2009) is another excellent writing on the conceptual framework of Brecht-theatre. She introduces the causes, processes and aims of Brecht's epic theatre. On the contrary, Ajoka has yet to receive critical attention. There are only few and inadequate commentaries on the role and social impact of Ajoka theatre in Pakistan. Fauzia Afzal-Khan's book *A Critical Stage: The Role of Secular Alternative Theatre in Pakistan* (2005) presents some comments upon Ajoka. The present research is an exclusive study of Ajoka.

Brecht was a playwright as well as a marked theorist of theatre. From early twentieth century to his death in 1956, he continued to present his theatrical views and theories. The techniques Brecht employed in his plays and performances are generally called *Verfremdung*—the distancing devices. These are political instruments to break the trance of the spectators in the theatre hall and intellectually awaken them to seek a practical solution for the social problems that are manmade therefore changeable. Political in makeup, the distancing devices transform the character of playtext, theatrical performance

and audience. They are so many in numbers but only the foregrounded ones like episodic composition of plot, narrator and narration, dialecticality in characters, situations, moves and premises, gestic acting, plot interrupting songs and dances, ideologically constructed images, and the Brechtian comic are included here for analysis.

The aims and objectives of an alternative theatre demand specific aesthetic techniques and socially evolved thematic material. The first thing that grips our attention in the theatrical performances of Ajoka is a departure from the linear plot that was given maximum attention in the dramatic theatre. Following Brecht who was an advocate of a nonlinear plot, Nadeem composes plays for Ajoka productions that are generally episodic in character. Again and again the audience are exposed to interruptions in the flow of action. The purpose of this technique is to bring the spectators out of trance to remind them that they are in the theatre and what they are watching on the stage is not reality but an illusion of reality (Esslin, 1980, p. 113-116). The attention of the audience that was fixed upon the end of the play is shaken; their gaze is invited to the socially constructed text and they are alerted to the rational aspect of the problem. *Woman of Sorrow*, an Ajoka production, is the story of a Bangladeshi lady who is brought to Pakistan by human traffickers. On her arrival, she is sold to a lecherous person who continues to exploit her in each respect. Tired of sexual and social exploitation, one day she burns herself publicly. The news catches the attention of national and international media. Therefore, under media pressure, a high level commission is constituted by the governments of Pakistan and Bangladesh to investigate the issue. Three Bangladeshi women, Ambiya, Moeena and Fatima who are also exported to Pakistan in the name of marriage and job continue to visit the grave of Dukhini, secretly. Fatima's owner runs a racket of prostitution where she is daily sold for money; Ambiya is the second wife of a Pakistani who does not allow her to come out of the house and enjoy social life; she works as a slave at his home doing homely chores all day; Moeena is sold as a maid but she is a sexual object for her master. They tell their narratives of woe to each other near Dukhini's grave and also make a plan to run away both from their present self-insulting version of life and the fate of Dukhini. On that occasion, the agents come and tell them that they cannot go back to Bangladesh because the route they adopted via India to come to Pakistan has been sealed. They are convinced by the agents to be transported to the Gulf States for job prospects there. In this way, they are expected to be sold there to the new customers. Various techniques are adopted to create a nonlinear plot in the play: the text is divided into 16 scenes; the small-sized events are devised to appear in quick succession; the moment a character produces a gest, intervention by the other character is materialized. The consciousness of the text is also not subjective; it is the discourse that automatically situates the audience in a specific historical context and they take up the issue as the judge feels it necessary to produce his judgment after hearing

the point of views of parties involved in litigation (Althusser, 2005, p. 146-151). How Pakistan and Bangladesh can be called sovereign states? Aren't women treated as commodities? Isn't the exploitation of women due to unequal distribution of wealth? The fragmented plot and the open ended ending of the play raises such type of questions for the reader and the audience.

Ajoka plays are composed with implicit or explicit narrators or both. These narrators are basically political commentators who produce their critical remarks over the socially constructed situations to enlighten the reader and the audience. This is another device to keep the audience away from suspense and empathy; they are intellectually driven towards the flat aspects of the dominant ideology to replace them with secular and new ones. An Ajoka performance entitled *The Acquittal* that targets the military rule of Zia ul Haque is relevant to be mentioned here. The stage is a jail cell where four women are facing various types of sentence. A teenage girl, Jamila, is married to a very old widower whose own daughter is a grown up lady. When Jamila grows up, she feels that her aged husband is unable to satisfy her emotionally, socially and sexually, therefore she establishes relations with Feroz. The old man thrashes Jamila so much that she cannot recover for weeks. She is permanently tied to the cot by her husband as punishment. One day, she steals an opportunity to free herself, take an axe, and kills the old man there and then. Marium, an insane woman, dances at a tomb in Lahore and the police put her in jail for her anti-Islamic 'culture.' She get pregnant as a result of repeated sexual violence by the jail wardens. Zahida, a political activist, is also put in the jail for her hunger strike against antihuman and anti-women ordinances and policies. The play is a narrative that Zahida relates on the stage, when she is released from the jail. No doubt, she is an important character of the text but predominantly she produces her critical commentaries as a narrator upon the cruelties of the military. Zahida in her interaction with other jailed women raises questions like 'what crime you are here for?', 'can any woman survive without her purse?', 'who is the child's father?', 'why hasn't she been released yet?'. These questions of the narrator compel the audience to seek rationale answers. This is a successful ploy to awaken them to such type of challenging issues in their real life. This narrator also produces her comments directly upon the inhuman exploitation of women at the hands of the male in a specific period of history. While analyzing the horrible life of these prisoned women Zahida says: "I was not able to write in my diary for many days. I didn't know what to write, words failed me. Perhaps the right words have not been invented to describe what was unfolding before us. After all, men have invented both language and the dictionary. Philosophers, poets, linguists, those who have not lived through these experiences wouldn't know where to find the words to describe them. Whenever I started writing, tears would fall on the page instead of ink". The jail-cell is the metaphor of the entire society where women are at the mercy of powerful patriarchal system.

These critical narrators in the plays propel the mind of the audience to make a strong opinion against all those social pressures, laws, forces and customs which are ideologically constructed phenomenon. The spectator is charged in the hall to wage a campaign against such ideologies in the social milieu of their life.

Dialectical acting, text, situations, characters, scenes and points of view are intentionally placed side by side in Ajoka performances. This strategy that Brecht learnt from Hegel is also employed by Nadeem to enable the audience see the contrast between the opposing points of view. In a play *Granny for All Seasons*, the young Sabeen is flanked by the conservative paternal grandmother, Sabira, and the liberal minded maternal grandmother, Tahira. Sabira opposes Sabeen's desire for higher education as well as her acting career. Tahira as a contrast favours Sabeen's ambitions. Whenever Sabira expresses her regressive mindset, Tahira generates the opposite view cordially. For example, one morning the audience see Sabira upset because Sabeen is going to college without taking breakfast. Tahira finds a chance to inform Sabira that Sabeen as a growing child is more in need of freedom than a healthy breakfast. The first and second scenes of the play *Woman of Sorrow* are also put side by side to foreground the two opposing processes. In the first scene there is no dialogue but a procession of Bangladeshi women that are being trafficked across the Indian border to Pakistan is shown. In the second scene a lot of conversation is going on between two high ranking Pakistani and Bangladeshi officials but without any result. The critical audience are exposed to the helplessness of the abducted women whose trade is being pursued by a small group of ill-bred agents, unchecked by the governments of Pakistan and Bangladesh. The dialecticization of the two scenes forces the audience to be active supporters of the helpless individuals like the women being trafficked in this play.

Tragedy is a genre that is deeply linked with the concept of inevitability of doom and fall of man. Aristotle and his followers believed in the role of fate in human life but the political theatre that was developed by Brecht in the modern times is inclined towards the genre of comedy. This political comedy is different in its structure than social comedy; the former is the outcome of contradictions in the society that is ideologically materialized under the thumb of some dominant hegemony. The comic satirizes, in a ridiculous manner, the irrational practices of an ideological construct. In this way the unjust is not only belittled in importance, it is also presented as a phenomenon that is crying for healthy replacement. This aspect of Ajoka theatre, under Brecht's influence, is perhaps the most important feature to dub it as an alternative stage. Pakistan has been a laboratory for experimentation of so many ideologies. The Ajoka theatre has been instrumental in creating public awareness about these hegemonies. Unlike tragedy, comedy does not explicitly challenge hierarchical social formation. Ajoka play *Burqavaganza* is quite relevant here. The play thematizes

the new culture of intolerance in Pakistan. The presentation of Osama bin Laden in clownish colours invites generous ridicule from the audience. This comic performance also ridicules the idea of love in the puritanical culture. Like other members of the regressive society, Khoobroo and Haseena, the lovers in the play, appear in veils to meet in a park. But they do not get opportunity to enter into their amorous affairs. The other mask clad people lecherously interfere in the love life of the lovers. At last their love culminates in marriage. One day again they are in the park and they say 'Love is the best recipe'. Since this word 'love' is considered taboo in this new 'culture', they are charged with the heinous crime of 'being in love'. As a result, the lovers who are now husband and wife are sentenced to death by stoning publicly. This exaggerated treatment generates a lot of comedy that is subversive to the values and practices of some intolerant social segments of Pakistan.

Ajoka productions are interspersed with songs and dances; these elements are used as a political ploy because they cater to critical commentaries upon various ideological dominations. Besides, the dance and song sequences work as distancing strategies to interrupt the narrative again and again. Recurrent interruptions in the theatrical performance are always favourite for a political playwright. They push the audience to avoid empathy and awaken them to thoughtful and rational aspect of the problem being staged. *Black is My Robe* is an Ajoka performance that deals with the tactics of a *Pir*, the feudal-cum-spiritual figure of a village. This Pir retains ownership of the only well in the village. Wasaya, the water carrier, works as an employee of the Pir to sell water to the villagers. This poor fellow is exploited ideologically and economically at the hands of the Pir. One day, Opera, a stranger in the village, suggests Wasaya to establish his own business by carrying water from a distant well. The Pir does not like it and gets Wasaya's ox poisoned. When Ditta discovers a well in the locality, the fake spiritual leader gets him killed and occupies the well. Opera mobilizes the villagers and they expel the Pir from the village. In this theatrical performance there are many songs and dances that further the political sub-text of the play. People, at the start of the play, are shown as successfully interpellated in the ideological world of the Pir. The villagers who are subjected ideologically to the commands of the religious leader consider him a shadow of God. They often assemble before the Pir for blessings. Their following song is an address to the Pir:

We have come at your door.
Please fulfill our wishes.
You give life to those who are seriously ill.
You give children to the women who are barren.
Keep away those with evil eyes.
You have power over the wind and the water.

The content of the song is essentially political that mobilizes the conscience of the audience to see through the ideological simplicity of the villagers and the interrogative text employed by Nadeem to create ridicule in the ideological discourse. Thus Ajoka adopts and adapts many Brechtian theatrical techniques for its own politics to challenge the oppressive and exploitive ideological social constructions in contemporary Pakistan.

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