

Analysing Historical Dialectics in Shahid Nadeem's Play *Here Comes Basant Again*

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The present study aims at analysing the artistic role of dialectics in the context of different ideologies in Shahid Nadeem's play *Here Comes Basant Again* that was produced in 2014 by a Lahore based Pakistani playhouse Ajoka. The theoretical framework for the present study comes from Bertolt Brecht's theories on theatre and playwriting that are collected in his famous book *Bertolt Brecht on Theatre: Development of an Aesthetic* (1964). The surge of terroristic fanaticism that appeared in Pakistan in the last decades of the previous century is still continuing. Terroristic activities of the Taliban, in the play under discussion, are dynamically pitched against the indigenous centuries' old cultural festivities like kite-flying in the spring; this festival is called *Basant* in the local idiom. This dialectical confrontation is on various levels and in multiple configurations. The interrogative text and the 'quotational acting' both stir the rational faculties of the reader/spectator to prepare them to reject the unexciting ideology and vote for the healthy structure. The dialectical moves and volleys between the colonial forces of terrorism and the playfulness based local modes of entertainment theatricalise/aesthticise both the negative image of the Talibanistic zealotry and the positive face of the culturally sweet Pakistan. This agitprop theatrical production, on the one hand, effectively alerts the spectators of the dehumanising invasion of religious bigotry and, on the other hand, it encounters them to their own life giving forces like kite-flying.

Keywords: *Bertolt Brecht; Dialectics; Play; Ajoka Theatre; Here Comes Basant Again*

1. Introduction

Bertolt Brecht who is known chiefly for his views and theories on playwriting and theatrical productions, in fact, questions the centuries old Aristotelian traditions of the dramatic art. Brecht's political aesthetics regard art as a medium of revolt against the complacent and fixed socio-political structures. His Marxist ideology works behind his commentaries on art. He proved very inspirational to playwrights across the globe; even today his philosophy of art is practiced in the world. Shahid Nadeem who is the backbone behind the aesthetics of Ajoka theatre of Pakistan – a troupe with “resistance” that “carries on” (Ishtiaq, Punjabics, para. 1) – is continuing his literary career under the influence of Brecht. He gathers the material for his plays from the topical issues of the culture, aestheticises it and renders it before the audience to have a look at the ugly socio-political face. His agitprop productions are a very strong protest against the bullying practices on the part of the governments and the State. Ajoka theatre through its recent production *Here Comes Basant Again* “laments the ordinary folk of Pakistan who are unable to protect their identity, culture and values” (Banerjee, 2015, para.1).

Aman Ullah Khan Arman (1959) gives a very authentic and comprehensive account of all the important recreational festivities in Pakistan in his seminal book *Urs aur Melay* (Shrine Festivals and Fairs). This book gives a lot of clarity regarding the Basant festival also. The Chief Minister of the Punjab put a ban on kite flying as the metallic and glass coated string caused fatal injuries to different people. The religious parties also availed the occasion and levelled so many allegations against Basant celebrations. It was called a Hindu custom. Some fanatics said that kite flying and Basant were started by Haqeeqat Rai who was a rigid Hindu and, it was alleged, very unfair in his words to the prophet of Islam. Arman has his clear cut verdict on this matter. He says: “Basant is a seasonal festival of Indo-Pak sub-continent and it has no religious bearings ... Basant is regarded the herald of spring, wheat grows, and mustard blossoms in this season” (pp. 276-277). The people on this occasion wear colourful clothes that reflect the panoramic sky filled with so many kites of different sizes, shapes and weights.

A sufficient body of reviews was produced on Ajoka theatre's production under analysis. Hajira Saleem (2018) in her essay *Basant: Each Day is a Festival Day* critically analyses the history points of kite flying under the umbrella of Basant. Maharajah Ranjit Singh introduced Basant as a regular feature in the culture of Lahore. He and his queen Moran would dress themselves in yellow coloured dresses and enjoy kite flying and the other festivities like delicious food linked with recreational occasion. Since that era this festival is celebrated by all the elements of culture irrespective of age, sex, ethnicity and religion. “Basant is like a wakeup call to get up and live life once again and experience everything”, she says. This festival of the entire culture is the metaphor of the wind that moves the warm Atlantic towards England to replace inertia by dynamism at the start of spring season in *Whistling of Birds* by Lawrence. It is the period of full fruition, social harmony, unified societal togetherness and live affinities

and ties at every level of existence. Its most important message is to “celebrate life, to truly live” (para. 9).

Basant Means Happiness is an essay by Majid Sheikh (2018) in which he diagnostically investigates the spring festival that is celebrated in Lahore and the other cities of Punjab. He says that spring festival is celebrated throughout the world to welcome the flowering season once again in life. Citing historical references, he proves that Basant is not a Hindu festivity as is advocated by the extremist religious elements in the country. Mahmud of Ghazni himself enjoyed the Basant season in Lahore. Then Ranjit Singh announced a ten day holiday on this occasion and his “soldiers wore bright yellow costumes to compete at dancing and kite-flying, not to speak of other delightful pastimes” (para.2). He further says, “Our values and traditions matter” as they promote “a positive image about Pakistan, which is a much-needed breathing space in a country with an ugly image of terrorism” (para.9). Keeping all these things in mind, he urges the government to lift the ban on kite flying. He also recommends some measure to stop the cruel effects of Basant; for example, to earmark a particular area for the Basant festivities and the heavy fine for people who prepare metallic and glass coated string.

Basant: A Lost Festival of Lahore by Ajoka (2017) is a very informative and creatively composed essay. It throws light on Basant from so many angles. The article tells us that Basant, which is a centuries old tradition of Lahore, has been a festival of Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims etc. In the celebration of this festivity, “there are no barriers of faiths or different socio-economic category”. This is “an event that would distribute felicity ubiquitously” (para. 1-3). This article consists of many interviews that cover the economic, social, political and traditional aspects of Basant. Before the imposition of ban on kites, this festival was gearing up so many industries in Pakistan. Lahore was attracting so many Muslim and non-Muslim tourists from all over the world which increased the economic activity significantly. Different tourist companies were established to bring the guests to hotels in Lahore where they were supposed to stay during the event. Different cultural shows were arranged in which local, national and international singers, actors and celebrities took part.

All the above reviewed resources on Basant and *Here Comes Basant Again* are significant. They discuss the play under analysis and the spring festival from various angles. But there were some other aspects of this phenomenon which needed investigation. Keeping this situation in mind, the present researcher chose the play for political examination. The present research uses Brecht’s theories on play text and theatre.

2. Theoretical Framework

The type of political theatre and drama that Bertolt Brecht introduced in Germany in the first half of the previous century is still inspirational for the writers of dialogic writings across the world. His famous book *Bertolt Brecht on Theatre: Development of an Aesthetic* (1964) contains all of his important theories on playwriting and theatre. These theories inform the



present research project as its theoretical framework. Brecht's theory on drama and theatre are, in fact, the name of so many theories and conceptual frameworks. The present study applies Brecht's concept of dialectics to the theatrical production of *Here Comes Basant Again* (2014). Brecht borrowed his philosophy of dialectics from Karl Marx's theory of dialectics. Brecht used his dialectics in so many configurations and at different levels. For example, his theory of episodic plot is one manifestation of his dialectics. The episodic plot is basically a political instrument in the hands of Brecht, the playwright and the theatre director. He also makes use of dialectics in other aspects like the multiple genres where different registers come in contact with each other to consistently act and react against each other. The figures belonging to oppositional ideologies are also brought against others to let the spectator analyse the difference between the healthy and the unexciting social structures.

Shahid Nadeem, the writer of the play *Here Comes Basant Again*, composes his plays generally in the light of Brecht's theory of dialectics. The title has been taken from the song written by Hafeez Jalandhari (Kulliyat-e-Hafeez Jalandhari, Pg. 95). The play was written in the Punjabi language, a regional language of Punjab, spoken in Pakistan and India's Punjab provinces. The book containing three plays was launched by Ajoka theatre in 2018 (Daily Times; JANUARY 11, 2018). The Lahore based playhouse Ajoka produced this play in 2014/2015 & 2018. It was directed by Madiha Gauhar. The theatre also works under the influence of Brecht's theatre. This Pakistani theatre is a socially committed cultural art form that continues to raise voice in the form of protest against the antisocial and oppressive socio-political structures.

In the play under discussion, there is a 'to and fro motion' going on between the two historical paradigms: the old traditional festivals of Lahore like Basant, such as kite flying in the spring season, are under the severe threat of the most puritanical form of religion i.e. Talibanisation. It shows the non-committal resistance projected by Raza Rabbani (Saleem, Azim, Din, 2018). The conflict which we observe in any story told after the lapse of time, the understanding of audience changes as is the case with adaptations of classic literary works in the postmodern world (Azim, Hussain & Bhatti, 2019). The dynamic conflict between the two ideologies enlists the audience and forces them to comprehend the opposing mindsets and vote for the healthy orientation. Brecht (1964) says, "The parts of the story have to be carefully set off one against another by giving each its own structure as a play within the play" (p. 68). The play discusses the conflicting view. The dialectical aspect of acting is not less important than the dialectical playtext. The actors on the stage deliver their dialogues to each other but most of the times their address is to the audience: their hands, their gestures and their eyes are towards the spectators.

3. Research Questions

The present study is pursued with the help of the following research questions.



- 1 What role the dialectics plays in juxtaposing the antagonistic ideologies in *Here Comes Basant Again*?
- 2 What are the intended purposes of the interrogative text/theatrical production of *Here Comes Basant Again*?

4. Data Analysis

Episodic plot was the backbone of the epic theatre that Brecht started in the 1920s in Germany. Contrary to the traditional dramatic theatre, his theatre and dramaturgy were alternative in character. He programmatically replaced the conventional coherent plot by the self-containing episodes that loosely constitute the plot. “Like the segments of a worm, each (scene) is capable of life even when cut off from its neighbour” (Leach, 2004, p. 117). It was a political move of the author to place different episodes, events, ideologies and scenes side by side: these elements are designed to automatically enter into a conflict with each other. This dialecticisation of all the scenes and events in the play challenges the rational faculties of the spectator to observe it like a judge: to trace and have full knowledge based on the cause and effect principle. Brecht expects the audience to “observe the mechanism of an event like the mechanism of a car” (Feuchtwanger, 1928).

Like many playwrights of today’s world, Nadeem also borrows this Brechtian technique of episodic plot to embed it in his play *Here Comes Basant Again*. At the very start of the play, the voice of Mauju and that of Zanib enter into a dialectical conflict. Mauju is an old kite maker living a very humble life in the walled city of Lahore, Pakistan. Sher Khan (2014) says that his nostalgic figure in “the play represented the aspirations of the old-city culture and its local aesthetic” (Tribune, para. 7). He is the true son of the soil; he represents the adherence to the indigenous customs and traditions. Local culture is the practical religion that we are supposed to follow in each and every aspect of our life is his poetics. That is why he does not like to leave the checkered profession of kite making. On the other hand, his daughter in law, Zanib, wants to sell out the house and move to some other area of the city where they can better earn the bread by doing some other work. The volley of argument and counter argument between the two characters triggers the spectators to juxtapose the contesting narratives for a better evaluation.

Basant is a Sanskrit word that stands for many inter-connected festivals that the people of the subcontinent have been celebrating since centuries to welcome the arrival of the spring season. The old kite maker advances his arguments one by one and very cleverly to challenge that of Zanib. As Mathew Arnold in the defence of poetry quotes its antiquity and historical consistency, in the same way Mauju recapitulates the history of kite flying in favour of his narrative. His forefathers started the business of kite making nearly five generations back. All the members of the house with their varying ages and genders cooperated all day with each other in the processes of kite production. Women were to knead the fine flour; the males were supposed to prepare the chemicals; and the young boys and girls were eager to coat the string

and move the spools. The father of Mauju's grandfather was a servant in the court of Maharaja Ranjeet Singh to prepare different types of smaller and bigger kites that satisfied the fancy of latter's queens. The Maharaja allotted labels to each of his favourite kites after the name of his queens. If Moran was his most favourite kite, Billo was the other lovely name that danced across the sky in a mesmerising way. Small metallic bells tied to the ankles of Billo produced sweet music everywhere. These kites not only decorated the sky with panoramic colours, they also produced a huge hustle and bustle all around to captivate the totality of the society. All these activities provide the population with an opportunity "to assert their own identity and the existence of their own history" as "nations themselves *are* narrations" (Said, 1993, pp-xii-xiii).

The vibrating pride of the old kite maker consists in one thing only: his intoxicating faith in the centuries old liberal, harmonious, peaceful and exceedingly beautiful existence that sprang from the given geography automatically. It is his conveyed but not stated conviction that it is our native culture that shapes our social being, that gives us identity and that gives us the true joys of life. That is why its protection, preservation, maintenance and reproduction make a huge demand on its people. While commenting on this theatrical production, Nasir Mahmood Siddiqui (2018) says "Mauju represents the phenomenon of great self-realization that was not possible in the absence of spontaneous, free, romantic and collectivity based homegrown culture" (personal communication). Mauju who is heavily addicted to his native culture is also structured in nostalgia. Having retold his family's long relationship with Basant, he tells his grandchildren about the splendid achievements of his wife in the field of kite making. His habitual verbalisation of the spring festival gives him space in life and fresh oxygen in existence on the one hand, and an opportunity to successfully orient the younger generation towards the historic festival on the other hand.

The communistically well harmonised collective life represented through the old man is challenged by Zainab, the daughter in law of the former. She directly tries to convince Mauju to sell his native house and settle down in Township. She holds that now the business of kite making is gone to the air they therefore should start some other business in a different place. So many other people of the area have already sold their houses to move somewhere else. She repeatedly tells Mauju to stop the manufacture of kite-making otherwise one day the police would arrest him as kite flying is banned in the city. In response to the advice and threat that comes via Zainab, Mauju releases his argument; he says that kite flying was the expression of the local culture but some unwise elements due to the use of metallic and glass coated sting got the festival of kite flying banned. Sarwat Ali (2014) says that the play under discussion is written "in the manner of a polemical exchange between various sets of characters, brought out tensions embedded in our society -- with Basant becoming a symbolic reference to a whole lot of divergent points of view that have gone into the unruffled mix that Pakistani society has become" (para. 2). The audience find themselves compelled to vote for the healthy voice in the logical confrontation between the father in law and the daughter in law.



To put the confronting ideological structures side by side and then push them to act and react against each other politically is a common phenomenon of Ajoka theatre of Pakistan and the play texts of Shahid Nadeem. In the play *Here Comes Basant Again* the names and the content of these scenes seem to launch a campaign and attack against each other. In this conflict of opposing narratives, the defeat of the regressive voice and the victory of the progressive voice is dramatised. In this process the audience not only enjoys the art, but they are also instructed socially and ideologically. Zehra Nabi (2014) says that Nadeem's "plays are not meant to simply entertain but also to make the audience think" (para. 3). Sometimes it happens that different antagonistic characters with their contrasting mentalities turn belligerent in the same discourse. Such spectacles not only train the audience dialectically but also rationally. This dialectical formula of Nadeem and that of Ajoka takes the form of metaphors, historical periods and social institutions. For example, in the play under discussion, the traditional, composite, all inclusive and liberal culture of Lahore is brought in fight with that of the literal, puritanical and backward looking way of life of the Taliban. In the skirmish both the invading and the reactive structures of life attack the weak points of each other. The filter of the playwright and the tone of the theatrical production guide the reader/audience intellectually. When the combatting narrations are actively pursuing their orientations, their usefulness or their irrelevance is exposed to the spectators.

Kite making and kite flying along with the other joys linked with Basant, are the natural expressions of the local culture of Lahore and the surrounding areas. All phenomenon is native in character therefore it sweetly regulates the life of the people. On the other hand, the religiously fanatic elements who want to dislocate Mauju and the other kite makers from the walled city to spread the chain of their 'madrassas', religious schools, there are the unwelcome characters as they are the invaders who by force want to impose their theocratic ideology on the area. In a sense it is a severe tussle that *Here Comes Basant Again* presents in a dialectical manner to alert the audience to the tragedy that is going to happen with them if the terroristic elements have a win in the combat. In the battle between the indigenously grown culture and the puritanical version of religion the role of the State is not well defined. "We created a country without any roots in the ground and our Land of the Pure is still in the air, going haywire with the flow of the wind" (Anonymous, para. 2). Mauju and his associates are the guarantee of peace, social harmony, tolerance and progressive concept of a social formation. The madrassa-oriented ideology stand for the cruel colonisers who plan to convert the playful city life into an objectified colony. The interrogative text of the play and the 'quotational' acting on the stage raise questions to the spectators. Isn't the playful life represented by Mauju conducive to them? Can they live a dynamic life under the repressive fanatic religions and their madrassas?

Art loves to flourish in the company of other fine arts: they in fact interact with each other to sustain themselves. Their togetherness is necessary for their survival too. As when one is under attack, the fortune of the other ones is also not safe and secure. That is why they assist and console each other in the hard times. When the cultural art of kite flying is under the threat of repressive invaders and state apparatuses, other arts like painting, music and singing play their



role to provide a breathing space for the fellow art. We can safely announce that fine arts are the superstructure on the base of their culture. They give a sense of pride, sway, ecstasy and identity to their culture. The young generation around Mauju, the kite maker, like Kami, Rubi, Guddu, Guddi and Professor are in fact the extension of his essence and praxis. Kami expresses his desire to become a singer and his beloved shows her desire to be a painter. Their romantic playfulness binds them together. They are aware fully of the strict and bullying gaze of their parents against their cherished desires to become super artists. But in spite of all these panoptic surveillance by the elders and the narrow minded section of the society, they make a determination to realise their dreams in life. The support they can get in this regard is only from their college teacher.

The role of the Professor is also in league with that of Mauju and his associates. He tries to carry on the cultural traditions by providing the new generation with the education of sciences and fine arts. The philistine elements come forward to stifle all the avenues of traditional knowledge and arts. They are bent on hijacking the entire system via violence of each type. To stop them from their nefarious plans the role of the State is regrettable. The crudity of their thoughts and practices equate them with the subhuman levels of life. Just on the basis of their brute power they challenge the cultural face of the society and try to replace the lively and pleasant version of life by the stopped up and panoptic surveillance system where romance, freedom, liberty, romanticism and choices are altogether absent in life.

Edward Bond in his plays follows the technique of a series of scenes that are positioned in such a way that they thematically challenge each other with full force. This methodology of political playwriting enables the positive and negative points of the arguments to stick out. Nadeem in a scene makes the audience see Mauju in conversation with his kites in a basement. These kites are in fact the mobile dreams of a spontaneous culture that were not allowed to be actualised. These kites are delicate, beautiful and dynamic that stand for the structures and factors that knit the harmonies of the societal fabric. This amount of the dreams of a healthy culture are contrasted with the activities in the office of the RTC or the committee for the preventive measures of the chief of the terroristic land grabber. In his office various types of bombs are prepared to spread bloodshed here and there in the society. The staff of the terroristic chief is always busy in checking the internet sites, preparing their own version of syllabus for the society and collecting dummies from different areas of the city. The antithetical opposition that they carry out against the ideals of Mauju and the Professor invites the attention of the reader to different questions. Isn't kite making helpful in the realisation of a happy society? Is it dangerous to the society to let the cruel land grabbers dislocate the kite makers? Isn't it bad to let the fundamentalists impose their own theocratic version of religion on the masses? The reader/spectator is expected to visualise the answers to these questions.

The Professor is forced by the extremist elements to stop his teachings to the class. Then he tries to guide his students secretly in a basement in the field of that music started by Amir Khusro, a Muslim Sufi musician and poet of the subcontinent, the stopped up face of the society



again comes to the fore to stop it. Then Mauju and his associates one day start the celebration of Basant. They are very enthusiastic and charged to visit the true raptures of life at the start of the spring season. The so-called leaders of the religion again come to disturb the atmosphere of joy and ecstasy: the brute force wells out to swallow the scene of cultural beauties. They get Mauju arrested so that any future chances of Basant celebrations are frozen forever. The spectacle of joys that the kite fliers jointly create through their cultural oneness and the bodily brute force that that is introduced by the inertia stricken regressive elements are dialecticized intentionally by Nadeem. The literal and imaginative sense of life are juxtaposed to let the audience vote for the healthy point of view by rejecting the stale aspect of life.

5. Conclusion

The present research was started to analyse Shahid Nadeem's play *Here Comes Basant Again* in the light of two questions: (i) What role the formulation of dialectics play in the given theatrical production of Ajoka? (ii) What is the role of the interrogative text in the play? The present researcher can humbly declare that the current study produced very encouraging results and implications. Both the text and its theatrical production under the Ajoka playhouse very cleverly make use of the Brechtian theory of historical dialectics to achieve the intended goals. Various contrastive provisions of the opposing ideologies are yoked together to let them act and react consistently against each other. Here the theory of dialects by Engels is used that accounts for the series of attack and counterattack of social structures that grapple with each other. This technique is devised to let the weak point be defeated by the powerful one. The time baud system is exposed through this method and the audience is tempted to go for the new aesthetics of life now. Mauju and his associates on the one hand, and the Khan contractor and his friend on the other hand time and again at different levels of their respective discourses act and react against each other. The self-referential text says one thing but means the other thing. It is also a political strategy harnessed here to let the audience/reader see the difference between what is said and what is suggested.



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