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Ajoka Theatre as an Icon of Liberal Humanist Values

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ABSTRACT

There are multiple ways of transferring human values, cultures and history from one generation to another. Literature, Art, Paintings and Theatrical performances are the real reflection of any civilization. In the history of subcontinent, theatres played a vital role in promoting the Pakistani and Indian history; Mughal culture and traditions. Pakistani theatre, "Ajoka" played significant role to propagate positive, humanitarian and liberal humanist values. This research aims to investigate the transformation in the history of Pakistani theatre specifically the "Ajoka" theatre that was established under the government of military dictatorship in Pakistan in the late nineteenth century. It was not a compromising time for the celebration of liberal humanist values in Pakistan as the country was under the rules of military dictatorship. The present study is intended to explore the dissemination of liberal humanist values in the plays and performances of "Ajoka" theatre. The research is meant to highlight the struggle of "Ajoka" theatre for enhancing the message of love, tolerance, peace and other humanist values in such crucial time.

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1. Introduction

This research is an attempt to unfold the contentions of "Ajoka" theatre to promote the liberal humanist values through its plays and performances with special reference to liberal humanist theory. The nature of the relationship between liberal humanism and literary world is discussed in order to have an understanding that how does theatre organizations and literary world operate and present the real examples of this relationship? In the late nineteenth century, under the dictatorship rule, Pakistani theatre seemed to lose the glint that political or social plays were supposed to offer. A few plays were addressing social and contemporary issues that were hounding the society. But Ajoka Team is an

extraordinary group of artists whose high plan of dedication to theatre has crystallized them together under the guidance of Madeeha Gauhar and Shahid Nadeem who have a history of spreading dramatic splendor on stage. Ajoka is not just a conventional platform where actors play unusual roles but also a prevailing art form of political and challenging theatre where enactors give a social message and much more to the story than just performing it on stage.

This research carries a sense of expectancy and anticipation about its innovative questions which are very compulsory for the fruitful research for this discourse analysis offers in the context of Pakistani Theatre Ajoka organization. It is going to offer a new area of study and the ideas that critics, literary intellectuals, the artists, the directors and the producers bring on the stage and address the sensitive matters. Pakistani theatre, Ajoka theater has adopted the style of "*Bhand* and *Nautanki*"¹ that has been the prominent tradition in the area of southern Punjab. Though Madeeha got her education at European countries as she was much inspired but the English theatre patterns but she does not bound herself in that particular style. She presents a unique and beautiful liberal type of theatre which is equally embedded with Asian and European models. Ajoka group's first performance was its play *Jaloos Jaloos* which was performed on stage in 1984. This play was an excellent presentation of that era that fulfilled the audience's demand as the subject was relevant and the play addressed the challenges of that particular era. Ajoka Theatre has celebrated its thirty years services under the project named "*Aaj Rang Hai*" which gives the proof of its creativity, promoting liberal humanist values across the border and its commitment towards bringing about meaningful change in society through theatre. Ajoka Team continued this festival for over a week at Alhamra staging its most popular plays and bringing the audience in the halls.

Ajoka theatre has achieved repute for presenting the dramas that address the society's most current and relevant subjects. The theatre group has presented the very important issues of society in the form of epic and storytelling. Its presentations have been very interesting and mind catching as the ground realities of public are unveiled in its dramas. The plays of Ajoka theatre usually address the prevailing issues in the society, the local themes, the universal messages, the preaching of love and peace. Its center has always been the dilemma of the common people of an under develop country. The plays performed at Ajoka Theatre's festival "*Aaj Rang Hai*" contained assertive values and truths that opened many ways to disseminate the liberal humanist values.

2. Literature Review

Ajoka theatre has earned good name in the Asian community by presenting dramas, performances and TV video plays to promote human rights and social change in the society. "Ajoka" theatre is such a group of artists which has established an honorable position in the world of literary art by presenting plays and performances in order to advocate the liberal humanist values. This liberal group has made much participation with other humanist organizations for promoting art and culture combining with social and political awareness. The plays and performances this theatrical group presents the essential themes of humanism along with liberal values that has always been at the risk in the society under military regime. A famous literary reviewer Kershaw shares his views in the following words:

"If performance can highlight some of the sources of worldwide oppression by exposing how the politics of representation can be used to reinforce the marginalization of minority groups, and if it can create a fresh cultural space in which the silenced majorities may find a voice, then it can lead

¹ These terms refer to the oral traditions of presenting and performing commonly prevailed as dramatic art in Punjab.

to the wider liberation of humankind's most precious resource." (Baz,1992).

In the history of Pakistan, Ajoka theatre has been working as an active movement by raising the high spirit among people for their fundamental rights. It works as a model and trainer for other groups and similar societies through its innovative steps. Pakistani theatre "Ajoka theatre" has worked a lot for encouraging love, peace and liberal values at national and international level. It has been at front line to minimize the socio-political conflicts between India and Pakistan by presenting their shared history and culture. An important columnist Mundrawala highlights the country's theatre from its beginnings. The tragedy of Pakistani theatre was that after partition some extremists and fundamentalists refused to have any sharing with Hindu culture. They denied owing the same cultural and lingual aspects transferred from Hindu society rather they celebrate the positive and beautiful image of subcontinent. Inspire of refusing to adopt Hindu culture; the initial local theatre of Pakistan unintentionally expresses its association to the previous Asian customs, civilization, as well as the myths, accepted folklores, with philosophical conceptions like communalist theatre. An Indian writer Sengupta says in her article.

"At such time of military regime which gave air to religious fundamentalism, cultural hindrances, narrow-mindedness and insecurities which banned so many things particularly theatres. This specific time in Pakistani history is comparable to the Puritan age in the English theatrical history. In such circumstances the birth of Pakistani "Ajoka Theatre" proved much stimulating was born. The two major two media teams that presented dramatic, sensitive political recitals relentlessly are Tehrik-e-Niswan (1979) by Sheema Karmani and the Ajoka (1984) by Madeeha Gouhar. They supported the liberal humanist values including women's movements and workers movements" (Sengupta 39).

Besides this, one can observe some more liberal organizations like "Ali Ahmed's *NATAK*" and "Aslam Azhar's *DASTAK* (1982)" who took part in the rebellious activities by arranging such stages staging. The maximum writings and productions hit upon the political having great relevance with the time and targeted the oppressive policies. The revolutionary streams like "Tehrik-e-Niswan" and Ajoka theatre particularly were producing plays and performances that were embedded with the traditional and classical techniques and modern forms with Brechtian tradition. Mundrawala points out that "Ajoka's group's performance of "Jaloos" shows direct effects of famous the Indian dramatist Badal Sircar's "Michhil" composed in local language. She refers this play as "theatre of boldness watching of which gives a sense of participation in that defiance" (Munderwala117). Ajoka theatre has been continuously struggling for people's rights, minorities' rights, and women's rights by addressing the hounding issues of society.

3. Methodology

The present study is qualitative and descriptive in nature to reveal the feasibility of the contention. It is based on the liberal humanist paradigm of the plays presented by Ajoka Theatre. The research analyzes Ajoka plays and performances under the lens of liberal humanism. The research is an effort to answer the following questions.

- What is the contribution of Pakistani theatre, Ajoka theatre, to prorogate the positive image of Pakistan at world level?
- How much struggle has Ajoka Theatre made to enhance human life and values?
- What is the relationship between Liberal humanism and the literary world and how does it affect literature?
- Which particular aspects of Liberal Humanist theory are being presented in Ajoka Plays?

4. Discussion and Analysis

4.1 Gradual Development of Ajoka Theatre

Ajoka Theatre was established under the regime of military dictatorship in Pakistan. It was not an easy task to establish and develop a liberal, democratic, and egalitarian theatre in a country like Pakistan that has been ruled by military dictators in the maximum period of its creation, giving a little space to the civilian rulers. Unfortunately, Pakistani state has experienced the constant control of country under dictator's rules. It was very difficult to establish and practice some artistic ceremony which would question the imperialistic system. The politically active and vigilant theatre like Ajoka theatre which propagates the agenda of liberty, democracy, humanism, equality and liberalism along with the potential to encourage critical thinking to bring a positive change in society is considered suspect and threat for the ruling dictatorial authorities. The early plays and performances presented by Ajoka theatre represent the socio-political issues of that era. As Pakistan was under the oppression of military dictatorship, the people were protesting against such authoritative dictators. At such crucial time, Madeeha Gohar helped the local tribes, the common people, and the laborers through her writings giving them the idea to raise their voice against the domination of one particular class.

The well-known playwright of this theatre group Shahid Nadeem has made great effort to support the liberal humanist values through his writings. He is a man of revolutionary nature as he reacted against the political oppressions of his time. He was actively involved in the movements and protests against the ruling class in late 1970s and early 1980s. He rebelled against the dictatorial authorities by using the power of his pen. Because of his rebellious attitude he was thrown out of the university and was exiled but he did not lose hope. He was hopeful for coming time. His suspicious steps became the reason of his trial and ban on his writing. He came to know that it is not an easy task to resist against such prevailing extremist modules. He realized that it would be good for the inventive work to present as entertainments rather than protesting activities. His understanding created a desire to write an easy, familiar and available original stuff. The foremost dramas like "The Dead Dog and The Third Knock", have invented a democratic, moderate and better conversion as a mirror of his mind changing with different perception.

Ajoka Theatre emerged through this junction as Nadim shares his bitter experiences through his writings in a very enjoyable way. He is a brave and courageous person who does not feel repentance over his punishment and exile but feels proud of it as he fought the battle of ideas for promoting the ideas love, peace, tolerance, equality and justice for humanity. He is determined to continue these efforts till the last breath. He doesn't believe in hollow slogans and violent activities of protesting but rebels against the cruel and unjust leaders by writing plays and making people conscious about their rights. Freedom of expressions had become an illusion in such miserable circumstances. At such crucial time, Ajoka theatre came forward as a savior of humanity and started to give the voice to the suppressed nation. It presented the social issues of injustice, oppression and inequality.

Ajoka theatre presented on the stage the performance of *Teesri Dastak*, (1971). This play challenged the atrocities of military dictators and the prevailing violence and distrust in society which came in the result of those callous policies. This play presents the social and political injustices in a very humorous and comprehensive way by using the metaphors and other theatrical techniques. This play highlighted the exploitation, poor economic condition and sufferings of the poor people of Pakistan. The plays and performances of Ajoka Theater depict the period of late nineteen's in Pakistan when there were rebellious movements against the dictators. Shahid Nadeem was playing the leading role in these movements.

4.2 Relationship between Liberal Humanist Values and the Literary World

The study is under the paradigm of liberal humanist theory with the critical analysis of Ajoka plays. There is a strong relationship between liberal humanism and literary world. Both liberal humanism and literature talk about human condition and endorse the message of love, humanity, peace and harmony. Liberalism is the idea that all human beings are free from all dogmas of religion, politics and geography and literature also propagates the same universal values by advocating the concept of essential humanism. The idea of “Liberal humanism” comes with the concept particular of reading and analyzing style. Liberal humanism took its start from the arrival of literary academia with the starting of eighteenth century and got very effective till the time of nineteen forties. It was under the threat of many other continuing schools of thought about capitalism and “Feminism” in the late twentieth century. It was argued by F.D. Maurice in the nineteenth century that the reading and research of English literature unities connects the individuals to the preset and defined meanings of text with a particular recognition. “Liberal humanism supported a scientific, logical and rational point of view that puts an individual at the center of history, and viewed the history as the progress of Western concept, as this theory has served as the catalyst for the modern world's reliance on individualism. Its belief is in a common human nature, scientific rationality, and the search for truth as universal knowledge and certainty in the world”. (Maurice126). It has been viewed as a roadmap of gradually developed system of values and patterns placing the human being at central point focusing on one's rights, pleasure and identity.

This theory “liberal humanism” has an old and complicated past. The thinking behind this idea is to promote the values like love, tolerance and peace by defying all the geographical and political boundaries. Humanism took the present form from its struggle against the religious dogmatism, feudal ideology, and the spiritual dictatorship of the cathedrals and churches. As a result of rebelling against rigid orthodox doctrines of churches and cathedrals, the humanists developed a liberal, democratic and secular culture with ethical agendas. They brought secular knowledge instead of theological systems and the concept of a free, powerful human being who remains unaffected in every type of environment.

The liberal humanists emphasize on having reading of text by ignoring the societal matters. Liberal humanists distrust theory and ideas. “Literary study started in England the second half of 19th century embedded with the thought that “the study of literature would emancipate us from the notions and habits of our own age, connecting us instead with what are fixed and enduring” (Eagleton,1996). The belief is that literature has effects which sustain for long time as it is free from all type of rags of time.

According to Catherine Belsey, defines this term as “the commitment to man, whose essence is freedom” (Belsey 8). “Liberal humanism” gave the idea that the person is liberated, the fully author of the connotation and master of history. Unchangeable, eloquent, mighty, and independent, this creature requires a world which ensures full liberty. Later on, this theory was under the shadows of multiple other concepts. In this way different theories came forward but at the back of all these theories was liberal humanism because when one talks about feminism or Marxism, the focus is human being which is the central point of liberal humanist theory. Ajoka theatre's plays carry the validity for all ages and for the audience of all over the world because the subject of this theatre has always been the human being. Pakistani liberal theatre, Ajoka Theatre has been performing the plays like *Bullah* and *Dara* to spread the teachings of love and peace at international level. Bullah was a Sufi poet from subcontinent who stood against the atrocities of Mughal Empire. He was a poet, who had been making the people conscious to recognize their place on earth. His poetry illuminated the mind and hearts of people and they began to love humanity by forgetting the difference of religion. This shows that Ajoka theatre does

not just entertain people but gives very impressive message of love and peace.

4.3 Liberal Humanism and Pakistani Theatre

Liberal humanism is the idea that human being is the centre of everything and that all human beings are free from all the ties of religion, politics and geography having unlimited power. The liberal humanist believes that the best piece of literature is that which propagates the human and universal values. The paper highlights all the socio-political influences that have affected the development of Pakistani Liberal theatre Ajoka Theatre. This thesis uncovers all these aspects that have been at working in the way of Ajoka theatre both internally and at international level. It also highlights Ajoka theatre's effort of presenting the liberal humanist values since its existence, as the negative image of Pakistan has been portrayed at globe level by some religious fundamentalists, extremists. The history of Pakistani liberal theater is somehow complicated as it has seen many phases of oppression. Pakistan has undergone numerous social and political upheavals both internally and at international level. It has been the target of military dictators, extremists and some religious fundamentalists along with some external threats. At international level, this nation has been taken as the land of terrorists. Such were the issues when Ajoka theatre took the step and started its struggle to remove this tag of "terrorist nation" from Pakistan and presenting this nation as civilized, democratic, liberal, and peace-loving people. In this regard Ajoka theatre has to face many hurdles at national and international level as its plays and productions were banned to perform in Pakistani halls and theatres. Its directors, producers, Madeeha Gohar and Shahid Nadeem had been punished and exiled for many years.

But Ajoka theatre never stopped its agenda to fight for the rights of people and to make this nation free from the oppression of military dictators. Ajoka theatres plays were not allowed to be staged at international level but Ajoka theatre's determination and continuous struggle helped them to succeed in performing their plays. When the indo-Pak relation was in crucial terms, this Pakistani liberal group took the responsibility to create the wave of love and peace between India and Pakistan. For this purpose, "Ajoka" theatre started to work with the literary figures of other countries, and paid great attention to present the ideals of peace and tolerance. "Ajoka" Theatre and its team crossed Wagaha border line to perform and present the Pakistani theatre celebration in Indian state. Shahid Nadeem said at that moment:

"We are taking this bouquet of high-quality Pakistani theatre for the Delhi audience and we are sure they will respond with warmth like they have before," (Nadeem, Dawn.2008).²

"Ajoka" theatre performed its play *Bullah* in 2003. This tour helped to create a wave of peace and friendship between India and Pakistan. It was first time in the history that Wagaha border was opened for on foot crossing process. Shahid Nadeem said: "It is Baba Bulleh Shah's kramat 'if a play can open borders, what more could playwright want?'"(Nadeem12). "Ajoka" theatre has brought on stage the individuals like, Zahida, Opra, Manssor to rebel against such military dictators. "Ajoka" theatre has been presenting the liberal humanists' stance of timelessness, universality, humanity, showing over telling, to use culture and historical figures as tools to transmit the liberal humanist values.

5. Conclusion:

In present era, as that strife period of socio political oppression no more exist in Pakistan, Ajoka theatre has turned its focus from its politically and socially rebellious attitude towards more civilized issues of human society as it has started to represent the themes of self-realization, self-quest, search

² Nadeem, Shahid . television interview, "The Alternative" , *DAWN News*, 20 May 2008

for Truth, and an individual's value in the universe.

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