

SWAANG- A THEATRICAL-CULTURAL FORM IN PUNJAB: A STUDY OF SOCIO-RELIGIOUS POLITICS IN BLACK IS MY ROBE BY SHAHID NADEEM

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ABSTRACT

*Swaang is one of the conventional forms of Folk theatre in the sub-continent, specifically in Punjab. The characters, themes, situations and presentation, all assume a celebratory and merry tone in this form of performance. There are songs, music, and dance alongside the dialogues to make the performance livelier. Though this form exists as one among the many as an established form of theatre in India, there are a few writers in Pakistan (Punjab) as well who have attempted to revive this form in the Pakistani theatres. This paper analyses the play *Black Is My Robe* by Shahid Nadeem to establish that the Folk theatrical form of Swaang uses the traditional / cultural folklore theatre as a form of resistance to highlight some serious socially pertinent issues in Punjab. Such a theatre may be considered a means of “the transformation of consciousness” (Khan 58) in the local communal groups as envisaged by Augusto Boal, a Latin American theatre activist. Instead of breaking away from the traditions of theatre, this play follows the conventional Punjabi form of staging to unfold the fake values and beliefs still followed by the people. The paper focuses upon the ways in which, through this conventional form, the writer is able to highlight the ills of the society being practiced in the name of culture & tradition. The familiar form of presentation i.e. Swaang, very subtly engages the audience to appreciate the resistance against oppression with a purpose of proposing change in the prevalent social systems.*

Keywords: Swaang, Folk, Theatre, Punjab, Culture.

Black Is My Robe stages the story of a Seraiki village facing scarcity of water. The plight of the people living in this village deteriorates as the fake saint exploits their religious, spiritual and cultural beliefs and practices. This very saint is a mimic man parodying the true concept of spirituality which forms an important part of the culture of

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Punjab. The false piety of this Pir is presented in contrast to the repentant Opra (stranger) who appears wearing black robes in the play. His presence in the play makes the situation dialogic and multi-faceted. The colour black itself has multiple cultural connotations. Black colour is closely associated with Mysticism, it absorbs all (e.g. light etc.). It is through this character in black dress that the playwright exhibits the ability to reflect critically on their surroundings and find solutions to their problems. Opra, in his black robes, acts to rectify not only his own misdeeds but also the criminally irresponsible actions of the villagers in having a blind faith in the Pir. Post Opra's departure, the villagers may be seen as self-reliant and enlightened.

The convention of *Swaang* is used as a tool to initiate discussions involving social, political, cultural, and even lingual matters of concern. Sandhya Sharma and Satish Kashyap in their article "Social Development and Folk Theatre (Swaang)" write, "Swang, having roots in native culture, is embedded in local identity and social values" (Sharma & Kashyap 166). The form, being familiar to the Punjabi people, helps the writer to adjoin the affected to the cause of fighting the evil making it one of the possible way to deal with the social problems. Tehmina Rashid writes about the extinction of the performance of folklores and puppet shows (Rashid 338). The play *Black is My Robe* starts with the Narrator announcing that they are going to narrate the story and that it is a Swang. "Today, in this Swaang, we are narrating this story." (Nadeem 150). Though the narrators seem neutral yet their narration reflects the cultural politics very clearly.

The role of the Narrator is very important in *Swaang* theatrical form. This role is used cleverly by the playwright to convey the message all the more effectively. The Narrator not only introduces the important characters and themes of the play but also foregrounds the true problems lurking behind the apparently normal cultural practices in the Sukka Pind (Dry Village). By equating a healthy ox with a healthy wife, the Narrator challenges the norms of the society that considers a woman equal to that of an animal. In some ways, the Narrators provide a counter narrative to the goons of the Pir. They are less assertive yet know each and every person in the village and may be considered as a collective voice of the villagers. Their interaction with Opra reveals his true character. There are three markers of identity for the villagers i.e. name, caste and place of origin. The Narrator tries to ask Opra all of these three questions. Opra's answers to these questions reveal how useless these identity markers are when it comes to solving the real life issues. The Narrator concludes the conversation by saying "You are a mysterious person." (Nadeem 156). The Narrator plays a great role here in identifying Opra as someone who is a true mystic, beyond the common labels that are used to tag people to normalize them. He cannot be policed and encourages the others to rid themselves of the useless beliefs and ideals.

The play does not just present the problems in the society but also encourages, rather forces the people to take actions. Opra pushes people to not to heed the manipulative

ideals propagated by the Pir and to act. He discusses the importance of action as the only means to relieve the people of the oppressive rule of the Pir. The emphasis in this play is not just on discussing the problems but to offer the solutions, a quality that makes the play socially significant. Sharma and Kashyap view *Swaang* as a form of communication. They considered *Swaang* an old way of communication and a traditional cultural practice.

Along with the familiar form, the play also uses the familiar language. The play was first written and performed in Seraiki language with the title *Kala Meda Bhes*. Dr. Fawzia Afzal-Khan refers to the “language politics of the theatre groups” (Khan 39) in her article “Street Theatre in Punjab”. She further writes, “linguistic choices reveal the group’s ... ideological stands on this question.” (Khan 39). Such a choice also helps the audience / reader to identify with the conflicts presented in the play and to take part in offering solutions to the problems stated in it. Tehmina Rashid also writes about this, “their choice of language reflects their constituencies as well as their respective ideological positions.” (Rashid 341). The use of Punjabi or any other regional language, therefore, allows agency against oppression thus making the play a forum to discuss socially relevant issues.

The Pir plays upon the fear and faith duo to rule the villagers and to exploit them in the worst possible way, making them believe all the while that they are doing just the right thing. The exploitation thus committed works on religious, social, economic, and sexual levels. The play is replete with Sufi songs frequently sung by different characters. Through this exhibition of the spiritual dimension of a Punjabi culture, the writer employs the form (*Swaang*) as a social agency that is both instructive and corrective in nature. Tehmina Rashid highlights that these plays have the strains of Sufi literature and music that question exploitation. The plays, therefore, through a traditional form of theatrical presentation, manifests the constructive roles the Sufi poetry may play in addition to the spiritual and aesthetic roles it has been playing.

Punjab, a land of Sufis and their Punjabi Sufi poetry, has a pre-dominant inclination towards such beliefs. It is owing to this reason that this becomes one of the major means of exploitation of the masses also. Tehmina Rashid, while talking about The Ajoka Theatre and the Lok RaHS refer to the presence of Sufi elements in both the groups. She regards the works of Sufi poets such as Baba Fareed, Bullah Sha, and Waris Shah as the message of compassion, love and kindness. This play also refers to the aspect of resistance missing from the preaching of the so-called saints who do so for fearing a protest against their oppression. The purpose is to highlight “... the subversive potential of Islamic Sufi thought” (Khan 50) which is lost behind the fake and exploitative forms of the same.

Swaang, meaning mimicry, re-enacts the cultural practices which have gone far from the original cultural beliefs. One may see the level of misconceptions / misperceptions from the very names given to the characters in the play Ditta’s full name is not Allah Ditta, it is ‘Piran Ditta’, meaning the one given by the Pirs. The only person who has some spiritual value is called an Opra i.e. stranger. The tradition of *Watta Satta* (exchange of

siblings in marriage) is found in its distorted form. The women are exchanged with animals. They are actually considered as animals who are tied to a relation and cannot break free. They are of value only when they produce an heir. Writing about the Pakistani Street Theatre, Tehmina Rashid, argues that the focus of this theatre is upon the exploitation of the women specifically the ones living in villages. She focuses more upon the traditional Sufi preference of considering women as equal to men and the ignorance of the same in today's times. This play, like the others of its kind, deal with "... nexus between the state and the conservative interpretation of Islam, a nexus that inevitably leads to gender bias within the social structures." (Rashid 346). To deal with the problem of misconception of religion and culture, the playwright projects the true colours of both the religion and culture so that the people may see for themselves what is right and what stands as wrong by providing them "a space for engaging in a dialogue and creative expression" (Rashid 346).

The concept of fertility is associated with true beliefs. Allah Ditta has this (both in physical and spiritual terms). He "claims that it has been revealed to him that there is drinking water in the village" (Nadeem 152). Furthermore, the true concept of spirituality is tied with repentance and action. One is expected to act to reform, believe in oneself, unlearn the false notions, fight the fear, and acquire vision i.e. the ability to see. At the end, one can see Sundari and Sohni as the true servers at the shrine, serving the villagers selflessly.

Reshma's role is very important. She is more sensible, more practical, courageous and lacks fear. She does her own business that remains unaffected by the highhandedness of the shrine. She infact uses the awe created by the Pir to her own end. While she sells her bangles, she sings the song "Girls, put on bangles in the name of the Pir / These bangles are blessed by the patron saint." (Nadeem 152). She shows clear resentment against the goons of the Pir who take their share from her earnings. She says, "It is on such occasions that I earn a little and even that has to be shared with the shrine attendants." (Nadeem 152). She is brave enough to threaten the goons when they try to cross limits with her; "I have told you many times not to bother me. I may throw all these bangles at your face." (Nadeem 152). Her resentment is always loud and clear at almost every stage in the play. It is she who discloses the identity of Ditta's murderers. She is not afraid of speaking the truth and risks her own life to relieve the society of the ills caused by their blind faith in the fake Pir. It is also significant to note that the villagers believe in her testimony more than they do in the claims made by the goons of the Pir.

Maasi is also logical and practical. She lacks emotions and makes decisions with precision. She is the voice of reason and presents simple solutions without any drama. She suggests the exchange of ox and wife between Wasaya and Ditta. Her logic lacks emotions or feelings. She says, "Can't you see? The world goes around on the barter principle." (Nadeem 165). At another point she explains, "Poor shariat has nothing to do with it. It is a matter of mutual convenience." (Nadeem 168). She is not the one who would let false

religious beliefs get in the way of doing something practical. Like Opra, she believes in action and encourages the others also to act. She tells Wasaya, “Stop thinking and decide.” (Nadeem 168). She reinforces the need for action and says, “Now stop these questions and get ready to act.” (Nadeem 168). Furthermore, Sundri also serves not merely as an object of beauty. She believes in her husband when the others brand him a lunatic. She resists the mistreatment she receives at the hands of her husband Wasayaa. It is she who becomes the true spiritual figure at the end. Together, Reshma, Sundari and the Maasi form the rational aspect of the society. They do something to relieve the society of the ills.

Swaang comes forward as the most appropriate form to portray the true colours of Punjab. There are songs for different occasions in the play. For instance, there are songs for marriage, death, celebrations etc. The playwrights attempt to “express themselves culturally” (Khan 42) and yet write a play “with a conscience” (Gohar (Khan) 42). Shahid Nadeem, the writer himself expresses the immediate purpose of making ideas public and making people conscious of the injustices they have to face. The conflict is introduced right in the beginning of the play. The illogical beliefs and practices are laid out in the barest form. Even when Opra has not yet brought out the lack of reason in these, the audience / reader can see for himself how ill-founded these beliefs are. For instance, when Opra comments upon Wasaya’s low earnings, he replies, “It is difficult, but this is our fate. We submit to the will of Pir Saeen.” (Nadeem 151). Their drive for the submission is so great that they cannot think of using their resources even when they have them. Wasaya has an ox but instead of earning money by using this resource, he is ready to leave it to the shrine so that he can gain favour with the Pir.

The Pir directors all outward efforts of the villagers inward thus engaging them in a philosophical journey only. The concept of Sufism, the soul of the Punjabi culture, is used to exploit the people both sexually and economically. The play places a lot of emphasis upon action. Ditta’s redemption lies in continuing to act. This is exactly what the exploiter preaches him against. Ajoka Theatre, the banner under which this play is produced, believes in the philosophy propagated by Augusto Boal, a Latin American theatre activist. Boal writes in his book *The Theatre of the Oppressed* puts a lot of emphasis upon action. The action in the play encourages also the spectator to act. Involving the people in working for the change makes the work itself a revolution. Boal viewed the theatre as a place for rehearsing revolutions. The play, referred to as a rehearsal for the revolution, becomes a means of emancipation. According to Boal, even if the action is imaginary, it is liberating in nature. Opra tells Wasaya the importance of action right in the first few lines of the play. “Don’t hesitate Wasaya, act.” (Nadeem 151). It is with this action, that the seeds of revelations start. The villagers move from a total ignorance to an enlightened stage on which they can think and act responsibly.

Once Wasaya starts following the path of reason, shown to him by the man in black robes, the villagers start feeling better. They not only start getting enough water supply but

their spiritual beliefs also improve. Instead of the Pir, they started thanking God for their better condition. They sing, “The water sacks are a gift of God.” (Nadeem 157). They are praising God and not the Pir now. Ditta’s quest for water / well is also the quest for truth. Once it is discovered, everyone benefits from it. When Opra invites the villagers to “Move your shovel and free the imprisoned water” (Nadeem 174), he is actually helping them to free their spirits also. The well, therefore, acts as a symbol of the knowledge and the desire to act in the light of that knowledge. Such a stage is acquired through persistence and hard work. Ditta’s belief in the well is a belief in himself. He says, “O God, if you are testing my faith, then go on, test me. I am not going to give up.” (Nadeem 172). It is this belief in oneself which is required by all around Ditta. Opra tells Sundri, “Belief is a very strong force. Believe in yourself, even if you believe in nothing else.” (Nadeem 171). This concept is also distorted and misrepresented by the Pir when he recites a verse from mystic poetry, “The heart has a whole universe inside / Everything is there in your heart.” (Nadeem 173). He manipulates Ditta into believing that he should stop digging the well.

The Pir makes special efforts to stop people from believing in the true concept of faith. He uses the religious jargon only to take people away from it. Whenever someone from the village attempts to be logical and tries to improve his / her condition, he instils fear in them by telling that they are being unfaithful in doing such a thing. When Wasaya tries to keep his ox with him instead of gifting it to the Pir, the Pir asks him, “Why are you looking for material support?” (Nadeem 154). He further makes an offer to show them a way which will bless them both in this world and the next. Meanwhile, his goons continue to applaud the profundity of his statements. The ‘profound statements’ work for the Pir not only to make the people believe how pious he is but also how ignorant they are who fail to reach the depth of his sayings. As a result, the villagers remain baffled and are further confounded by the burden of the evil deeds, which the Pir makes them believe, committed by them. He tells them, in an angry tone, “Repent, repent, you sinners!” (Nadeem 155). The goons act as a chorus for him, saying “Forgive us, O God.” (Nadeem 154). Filled with fear and shame they feel for the sins they now believe they have committed; the people sing a traditional Qawali: Please fulfil our wishes / You give life to those who are seriously ill / You give children to the women who are barren” (Nadeem 155). Whatever the Pir says, acquires a spiritual mystique aggravated by the atmosphere of awe and fear created by his goons.

Opra, however, pushes Ditta into acting out the ultimate. It is the action that liberates not just Ditta but also the villagers. He warns Ditta, “Don’t do that, Ditta. Keep digging, don’t throw away the shovel. Your goal is very near... Don’t stop now.” (Nadeem 173). Opra realizes the importance of Ditta’s belief and also that how the redemption of the whole village depends on this. He makes Ditta realize the strength of his faith. He argues with him to explain how the well within needs to be realized also in the world outside. “The well of your soul is already full with your faith and belief... Don’t stop the search now.” (Nadeem 173). He supports this advice with the fact that the Pir who is

advising him to focus only on the well within is already the owner of the only well in the village.

The miraculous qualities of these saints include saving the people from the greatest of their fear i.e. evil eye. They sing, “Keep away those with evil eyes” (Nadeem 155). It is ironic because the greatest evil eye is that of their Pir. He resents Wasaya when he decides to keep his own ox and he openly begrudges Piran Ditta when he continues his search for the well. No blessings of the people escape the Pir’s attention. Time and again, he keeps on telling them to render to the shrine all that they have. He suggests to wasaya that he should devote himself to serving the shrine and God can take care of his two wives. After the death of Ditta’s wife, he advises him to leave his children in the shrine’s service. He even exploits their wives in the name of blessing them with fertility. The villagers remain quiet because of the fear and shame inculcated in them by the Pir himself and his goons.

The play starts with a light, merry opening where the conventional form of Swaang is used to portray the traditional lifestyles of the people. For instance, the first fight between Sundri and Sohni seems to be humorous. Nadeem writes, “They fight in the traditional style” (153).

Sundri: You are good for nothing, okay!

Sohni: You are a fat cow, okay! ...

You have a black tongue and an empty lap, okay!

Sundri: Shut up, or I’ll slap your face, okay! ...

Sohni: Someone tell her to shut up!

Sundri: Someone stop this rival woman! (Nadeem 153)

The villagers enjoy the fight between the two rival women. This situation, however, aggravates in a very short period of time when this apparently harmless fight turns into a tragedy. “Sundri sings in a traditional style. He visits you all the time and never me /You enjoy new clothes and I am left with old tatters” (Nadeem 164). Finally, Wasaya gives Sundri to another man in exchange for an ox. This is interesting to note that the traditional concept of *Watta Satta* is used here to convey a very strong message. Ironically enough, through this exchange, i.e. that of an ox with Sundri, all get what is most required by them. Wasaya gets an ox that he can use for his business, Sohni gets rid of the rival woman, Piran Ditta gets a wife who truly understands him, and Sundri gets a husband who is intellectually compatible to her.

Sundari has always been a soul in search of the truth. She resists against the injustices done to her. She tells Sohni the same when she says, “But remember Sohni, Sundri is a tough nut to crack.” (Nadeem 159). She is also compassionate and understanding not just towards her new husband Ditta but also towards Opra. She has

something in herself which makes her believe in both of these men. She believes in Opra when he tells her that he will repay her in a different way: “Sundri pauses for a while and then pours water for him.” (Nadeem 158). She also believes in Ditta when he explains to her why he believes in finding a well one day. She “(looks admiringly): You don’t look crazy to me” (Nadeem 170). Later on when Ditta’s children ask her whether she believes in her husband or not, she replies, “I believe in your father” (Nadeem 171). It is in Ditta’s house that she finds the truth, the belief, and the real purpose of her life. After his death she devotes herself to serve the people of her village.

The free water meant a free life for the villagers. This is interesting to see how the Pir’s crimes flow from the tongues of the villagers who have been wronged by him at different occasions. Their demand now is “Free our will. Free us.” (Nadeem 184). Each one recognizes their own true potential through the teachings of a man in a black robe. He was not a saint, he did not claim to be perfect or holy, but he was a simple man who acquires the true Sufi spirit. The form of Swaang, though conventional, helps the playwright to present cultural politics and the corrective measures to unfold the oppressive social systems practiced in the name of culture, tradition and spirituality.

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