

Theatrical Reflections:
**Exploring Ajoka's Representation of the Partition of Punjab (1947) in
Lahore's Punjabi Theatre Tradition**

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Abstract:

This research delves into the historical representation of the Partition of Punjab in 1947 through the lens of Punjabi theatre in Lahore, focusing specifically on the impactful work of the Ajoka theatre group. The study traces the evolution of theatre in the region, from its ancient roots to its contemporary significance, highlighting its profound socio-political role. Ajoka, known for its resistance theatre, stands out in addressing various societal issues, including the pivotal event of the Partition. Through critical analysis of plays such as "Anhi Mai Da Sufna" this research explores how Ajoka presents and interprets the Partition, evaluating the ideological underpinnings and narrative structures employed. The study aims to unearth the psychological trauma embedded in the portrayal of the Partition, employing theatre as an alternative source for understanding social history and offering a unique perspective on a historically significant event. Drawing on archival sources, scripts, videos, interviews with key personnel, and audience reactions, this research examines Ajoka's role in shaping the narrative of Punjab's Partition, bridging the gap between theatrical artistry and historical representation.

Keywords: Theatre, Punjabi Theatre of Lahore, Ajoka, Partition of Lahore 1947, Theatre on Partition, Anhi Mai Da Sufna

1. Introduction

Theatre is one of the oldest forms of performing arts. It is “an art concerned almost exclusively with live performances in which the action is precisely planned to create a coherent and significant sense of drama”(Chaillet, Guthrie, & Davis, 2018). In fact, Theatre is a collaborative form of fine arts that uses live performers, typically actors and actresses, to present the experience of a real or imagined event before a live audience in a specific place, often on a stage. The performer usually interacts with the audience through gesture, speech, song, music, lighting, and dance. Etymologically the word theatre is derived from the Ancient Greek *theatron*, which means a place for viewing, seeing, watching and observing(Bay, Izenour, & Barker, 2024). For centuries, theatre has been a significant medium through which people express their feelings and emotions regarding social and political problems.

A Historical Evolution of Theatre in the Indian Subcontinent

Historically speaking, Theatre in India is as old as the Greek theatre. The roots of performing theatre in India can be found in *Natyashastra* (Ghosh tr., 1951), an old indigenous Indian text. The book was written between 200 B.C.E.-200 C.E., which gives a detailed insight into theatrical organization and techniques being followed or practiced at that time in India. The theatrical practices in India are common and have earned the status of rituals in all regions of India. The epics of *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* are still dramatized and performed across India with great religious zeal. Then there is considerable work in the form of Sanskrit dramas by Kalidasa, Bhasa, and Shudraka.

Modern Indian theatre consists of folk performance styles, commercial plays, musicals, and educational and political street theatre. Anuradha Kapur (2004), the famous Indian theatre academician, divides Indian theatre traditions into two periods; the first one is called Company Theater or the Parsi Theater (1860 to 1930), and the second one is the Theater of Roots (1960

to 1980). The first period was influenced by the British and Parsi traditions adapting and borrowing literature and techniques from European and Persian traditions. The second period was an attempt to revive the old Indian theatre art on the bases of *Natyashastara*.

An Historical Evolution of Theatre in Pakistan

In Pakistan, the tradition of theatre can be traced out from pre-partition mostly associated with Urdu language. It started from the production of *Inder Sabha* (The Heavenly Court of Indra) under the patronage of the court of Wajid Ali Shah, Nawab of Oudh (Bilal, 2018). The British theatre companies introduced new form of theatre in the subcontinent. Theatre companies were invited to India to entertain the British officers and the local elites.

Lahore was the center of cultural activities as well. It had institutions like Government College, Kinnaird College, National College of Arts and Oriental College. These educational institutes carried rich drama traditions for years. These institutes mostly performed translated versions of European and American plays for the entertainment of the educated class. Apart from this; a special hall for the drama or theatre productions was set up for this purpose, commonly known as Alhamra, which later on was made Pakistan Arts Council in December 1949.

Norah Richardson (Singh n.d., 2020), the vice principal of Dyal Singh College Lahore served the theatre cause efficiently. She was an Irish-born theatre practitioner. She came to Lahore with her husband who joined Dyal Singh College as English literature teacher. She introduced modern drama techniques in Lahore and penned down many English adapted plays in local languages especially Punjabi. She produced her first Punjabi play *Dulhan* in 1911. She served theatre for almost 60 years (1911-1971).

Numerous amateur groups emerged in newly formed country i.e. Folk or Lok Theatre in Punjab after the independence. In the dictatorial regime of Ayub Khan, Leftist theatre emerged led by student mobilization. After Ayub's fall, "a concept of new Pakistan emerged, which did not

correlate with the dominant English drawing room comedies or other remnants of Parsi theatre”(Pamment, 2008).

In this new political era, emerging writers gave boost to music, literature and art. As Fawzia Afzal Khan (2005) suggested, it was a kind of cultural renaissance in the 1960s in Pakistan. “English language plays became marginalized and foreign play adaptations, increasingly localized, took hold of the main stage. Student theatre activity, in particular, began to flourish, with individuals strongly influenced by the new left anarchists, European absurdists, Afro-Asian movements, and indigenous tradition”. Major Ishaq Ahmed, Sarmad Sehbai, and Najam Hussain Sayed introduced themselves as new talented playwrights, infusing a new spirit by reviving the Punjabi folk idiom. “This was a time when theatre began to flourish with a fresh vigor, and some of the most original plays were written and staged for the first time in the history of Pakistani theatre”(Mubarak 2015). Their plays are famous for strong characterization. The famous works of these playwrights were *The Dark Room* by Sarmad Sehbai, *Mussalli* by Major Ishaq Mohammad and *Takht* by Najam Hussain Syed.

Syed Imtiaz Ali Taj was also among the notables who wrote remarkable theatre scripts like *Anarkali*, which is still considered a masterpiece of Urdu literature and has been performed at different arts councils of the country from time to time. Imtiaz Ali Taj’s play and character *Chacha Chikkan* is still everyone’s childhood memory.

Another form of theatre is *Swaang*, which is a much older tradition commonly known in Indian Punjab. It featured folk tales like *Heer Ranjha* and *Sassi Punnu*, evoking voices from Punjabi music traditions which entertained the Punjabi masses. The performers were not only good actors but also good singers. According to Fouzia Saeed (2011), *Bali Jatti* is the most famous performer who would act and sing and move her theatre from place to place. In the sixties and seventies, this genre of theatre was popular due to the lack of electricity. A popular actress who also owned a theatre herself was *Bali Jatti*. Most of the attendees were the ones who could not

afford TV or Cinema experience. As the film industry flourished, folk theatre started to decline. The actors were being given more money to work in film rather than the street or folk theatre. As folk theatre virtually dwindled down and gradually disappeared, it was replaced by the film industry and VCR culture

Then, the dictatorship of Zia ul Haq started in 1977 and lasted until 1988. This bleak regime badly affected the theatre and arts industry. The artists started to disperse; some even left the country in a state of self-imposed exile. The country witnessed severe media censorship.

Ironically, this led to the emergence of youth-led alternative theatre groups to criticize the self-imposed version of religion and oppressive rule of Zia in major cultural hubs of the country; Karachi and Lahore.

Some colleges in Lahore, Government College, National College of Arts and Kinnaird College, patronized dramatics societies. These institutes staged mostly the translated versions of European and American plays or the original plays written in English, most frequently plays by Shakespeare for the entertainment of the educated, elite class (Mubarak 2015).

The major drama groups being operated in both cities were Ajoka , Lok Rehas, and *Sangat* in Lahore and *Tehreek-e-Niswan* and *Dastak* in Karachi. These groups strived to create awareness in rural and lower fractions of society. These theatre practitioners tried to ignite resistance against the military dictator, General Zia ul Haq. While doing that, they had to face aggression from the oppressive government of General Zia. They had to pay the price for that, too. Some plays were banned; students and art lovers pursued their artistic but subversive activities at clandestine locations. Ajoka was the pioneer and leading theatre company in this regard, other groups followed them (2015).

Apart from these major groups, there were also some names from the Indian Peoples' Theatre Association, a leftist group, who migrated to Pakistan, i.e., Ali Ahmed and Mansoor Saeed,

who founded the groups Natak and Dastak, which provided the base for the political struggle upcoming groups, *Ajoka*, *Tehreek-e-Niswan* etc.

2. Ajoka Theatre

Ajoka Theatre, founded by Madeeha Gauhar in 1984, is renowned for its thought-provoking productions that often center around social and political themes relevant to Pakistani society. The theater company's repertoire spans a wide range of topics, but some of the prominent themes it focuses on include social justice and human rights, gender equality and women's empowerment, political commentary and satire, interfaith harmony and religious tolerance, and cultural heritage and identity (Nadeem and Gauhar, 2011). Through its compelling productions, Ajoka Theatre serves as a platform for raising awareness about pressing societal issues and advocating for positive change in Pakistan. By addressing these themes in their plays, Ajoka aims to spark dialogue, challenge societal norms, and inspire audiences to reflect on their roles in creating a more just and equitable society.

At the heart of Ajoka Theatre's work is a commitment to social activism, artistic innovation, and the promotion of positive social change in Pakistan. The theater company's productions not only entertain audiences but also provoke meaningful conversations about the challenges facing Pakistani society. Through powerful storytelling, engaging performances, and nuanced portrayals of complex issues, Ajoka encourages audiences to confront difficult truths, question existing power structures, and envision a more inclusive and compassionate future for their country. By highlighting the struggles and aspirations of ordinary individuals, Ajoka Theatre strives to inspire empathy, solidarity, and collective action among audiences, ultimately contributing to a more vibrant and dynamic cultural landscape in Pakistan.

3. Introduction of the Writer: Shahid Nadeem

Shahid Nadeem is the writer of the play *Anhi Mai Da Sufna*. He is a prominent playwright who enjoys a key position in the Pakistani theatre spectrum. He started writing plays since his student days. Then, he associated himself with the Ajoka group and the founder of Ajoka, Madiha Gauhar. Shahid Nadeem has written more than 50 plays. The unique thing about his plays is his bold themes and creative richness. His dramas are full of meaningful themes, beautiful diction and mesmerizing music. In 2009, Shahid Nadeem was awarded the Pride of Performance Award.

4. Anhi Mai Da Sufna

Anhi Mai Da Sufna (Nadeem, 2018) is a story of the generation who had to leave their birthplace, families, and friends on the eve of The Great Partition of 1947, but their love for their birthplace never faded.

5. Plot Summary:

Scene 1:

The chorus comes in the form of a group and starts singing about dreams. As they finish the song, they ask questions about how dreams are important and whether they can be watched by blind people. They then open the drama, “*Anhi Mai Da Sufna*” the story of a blind woman who watches dreams all the time.

Scene 2:

The scene opens with Mai Janki, the protagonist, who is having a dream while sleeping in her bed. Her dream is full of bloodshed, where she is screaming and looking for her friends and family. It is a dream set in partition times. Mai gets up screaming and calls for her family. Her

son, Gur Bakhsh, calls his wife, Gurmeet, to get water for his mother, Mai. Mai insists on going back to her village in Pakistan. Mai and her family had migrated to India after the partition of 1947. Then she calls her granddaughter, Naina, to come and write down her dream. She narrates her dream to Naina.

Scene 3:

Two storytellers appear in this scene and narrate the story of another character, Rangu, who dyes clothes in Lahore. He was a Hindu originally, but now he has embraced Islam. He did not leave Lahore and his profession due to his love for his birthplace but left his family, including his wife and daughter.

Scene 4:

This scene describes Rangu's dye shop, where he explains color combinations to girls. Meanwhile, Bhola runs to him and gives him a letter from India to Rangu. This is a letter from his granddaughter Maya, who is getting married to the son of Rangu's best friend, Partap. In this emotional letter, she invites Rangu to her wedding. Rangu is very happy to read the letter and tells everyone about it.

Scene 5:

Storytellers appear on the screen and inform the audience that Mai Jaanki has been rejected while Rangu's Visa application is still being processed, and he is very excited to visit India. Mai Jaanki is furious to hear the news.

Scene 6:

Mai Jaanki is adamant that she wants to visit Prem Nagar, her birthplace, meet her friends, and breathe in the air of her village. Her family tries to tell her that it's impossible because her visa has been rejected, and she cannot go to Pakistan without it, but Mai insists that she will go by foot and does not need a visa to visit her village. She announces fasting, Maran Barat, in protest, and her whole family is shocked to hear that.

Scene 7:

The storytellers further explain how Mai Jaanki and Rangu are waiting to cross the border to meet their loved ones, and Mai announces fasting in protest and refuses to eat anything.

Scene 8:

In this scene, Rangu receives the news that his visa to India has been rejected because the name on his passport differs from the invitation he received from India. Rangu asks to change his name to his original name, but that is not possible either. Rangu insists that he wants to go to India. If he cannot go there, he will observe *Mon Barat* in protest and never speak to anyone.

Scene 9:

Here, Rangu is not speaking to anyone, and Mai Jaanki is keeping a fast in protest. Their families are worried about their condition and have no idea what to do.

Scene 10:

Mai Jaanki is very sick because she has not eaten for many days. Her family called a doctor to see her, the doctor is very worried about her condition and says you must do what she wants; otherwise, she is in critical condition. Gurmeet suggests that they should take Mai on a fake Pakistan trip. She cannot recognize as she is blind. In this way, she will be happy and start eating. Her husband is convinced, too, so they all give good news to Mai, and she becomes so happy to hear the news. She starts preparing for her trip.

Scene 11 and Scene 14:

Rangu is very sad and does not speak with anyone in this scene, while Mai Jaanki is very happy and preparing for her Pakistan trip. Rangu's family is trying to make him happy and singing songs around him. Hearing the songs, Rangu starts thinking about Maya's (his granddaughter) wedding. While he is tired of dying clothes, he sees a dream in which he attends his granddaughter's wedding and bids farewell to her with his blessings in the next scene.

Scene 15:

Maya is getting married, but she's anxiously waiting for her grandfather to attend her wedding. Rangu joins the wedding, and everyone is so happy and surprised that Rangu is in India to attend Maya's wedding. Rangu says he would not miss it for the world.

Scene 16:

The storytellers tell the audience how powerful dreams are. They feel real when Rangu attends Maya's wedding. Mai Jaanki is preparing for her Pakistan trip on the other side of the border.

Scene 17:

Everyone at Mai's house, including some neighbors, is preparing for Pakistan's visit. They are packing food, clothes, and gifts for the Prem Nagar people.

Scene 18:

Mai and her family and neighbors are on her way to Pakistan. The play takes a comic turn as her son stops at a fake border, and they all perform like border police. After passport control, they enter fake Pakistan.

Scene 19:

The storytellers narrate further that Mai is thinking about her friends and Pakistan and how she will meet them all, while Rangu has already visited India in his dream.

Scene 20:

Rangu is sleeping while everyone is standing around him and trying to wake him up. Rangu wakes happily and tells everyone about his dreams and Maya's wedding. His love for his family is so great, but his love for his city, Lahore, his friends, and Pakistan is even more. That is why he could not go to India during separation and became Rangu Lahoriya.

Scene 21:

Gur Bakhsh tells Mai they are in Pakistan, and it's night already, and they need to rest. Mai tells Naina stories of her village and tells her about her friends Zuleikha and Yousuf and their love story. Mai is so excited to meet her friends.

Scene 22:

Mai is sleeping and watching Yousuf in her dream and talking to him when Gur Bakhsh wakes her up. They then get up and enter a fake Prem Nagar, and everyone is waiting for Mai and greeting her. Mai is so happy to meet everyone.

Scene 23 to 28:

Mai has reached her village, Prem Nagar, and the whole village gathers to welcome her. Naina also greets Mai, and Mai recognizes her; she is surprised that Naina is welcoming her in Prem Nagar, but her son Gur Bakhsh says it's not Naina; it's the granddaughter of her friend Rani. The voice of Azaan is also heard, and Mai guesses it might be coming from the old nearby white mosque in Prem Nagar. When she asks the time, she comes to know that it is not Azaan time; she is very confused. No one let her speak and started beating Dhol. Mai asks about Zulaikha. She receives the news of the death of Zulaikha, and she is very upset. She asks to visit Zulaikha's grave, and they all take her to Zulaikha's fake grave.

Scene 29 and 30:

Mai is at Zulaikha's grave and introduces her as Janki. She tells her she has been missing Zulaikha and wants to talk to her. She explains that years ago, when the brothers of Zulaikha killed Yousuf, it was not her fault; it was Rani's fault. She has always been loyal to Zulaikha. She tells her she liked Yousuf too, but Yousuf has always loved Zulaikha. She wanted to say sorry to Zulaikha and explain herself. She had too much burden over her chest, which she wanted to release. She starts crying, and her family comes over. They take her back home. It

was raining that night, and as Mai returned, she slept deep and sound. All family members are tired, and all of them sleep well.

Scene 31:

The next morning, everyone wakes Mai and asks her about her dream; she says she is very happy because she visited Prem Nagar in her dream last night. They are all surprised to hear that.

Scene 32 and 33:

The storytellers tell everyone that no one knows if Mai's visit was real or fake. But she was very happy because of her visit in her dream. Dreams are important in one's life, and one should always take care of their dreams. Saying that curtain calls.

6. Analysis:

"Anhi Mai Da Sufna " is a tragedy that delves into the heartbreaking narrative of Mai Janki, a visually impaired woman, and Ustad Rangu Rangsaaz, an elderly dyer, both separated by the borders drawn during the Partition of India. Through their deeply personal desires to reconnect with their roots, the play transcends geographical boundaries to explore themes of longing, resilience, and the human spirit's capacity for hope amidst turmoil. Mai Janki's yearning to return to her village in Pakistan and Ustad Rangu Rangsaaz's wish to attend his granddaughter's wedding in India serve as powerful metaphors for the universal longing for belonging and the human quest for connection, even in the face of political and social barriers.

Directed by Usha Ganguli and Shahid Nadeem and written by Shahid Nadeem, "Anhi Mai Da Sufna " not only captures the individual struggles of its protagonists but also highlights the collective trauma experienced by the people of Punjab in the aftermath of Partition. The play skillfully navigates through themes of loss, displacement, and the enduring human spirit, offering a poignant reflection on South Asia's shared history and cultural heritage. As an Ajoka

Theatre production, it stands as a testament to the power of storytelling to bridge divides and foster empathy, reminding audiences of the resilience and interconnectedness of the human experience across borders.

Furthermore, the play explores the emotional and psychological scars left by Partition, illustrating the enduring trauma experienced by those who lived through it. Through the characters' struggles and aspirations, "Anhi Mai Da Sufna - Tragedy" brings to light the shared anguish and sorrow of the people of Punjab, whose lives were irrevocably changed by the events of Partition. By delving into the individual stories of its protagonists, the play humanizes the larger historical narrative of Partition, allowing audiences to empathize with the personal tragedies and struggles faced by ordinary individuals caught in the turmoil of political upheaval.

Overall, "Anhi Mai Da Sufna" serves as a powerful reminder of the human cost of Partition, offering a nuanced portrayal of its tragedies through the lens of personal experiences and individual resilience. Through its evocative storytelling and compelling characters, the play brings to light the enduring legacy of Partition and its profound impact on the lives of those affected, leaving a lasting impression on audiences as they witness the human drama unfold on stage.

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Digital Data

Videos and Pictures of Drama Performances of Ajoka Group

Interview, Shahid Nadeem, Researcher, 2023