

## **Censoring Practices in Theatre: A Case**

### **Study of The Curtain Raiser**

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#### **Abstract**

Theatre has journeyed through different transitions in the past. It has evolved and has become a whole industry and social phenomenon which has affected society a lot. In Pakistan, the theatre has not achieved much popularity, space, and acceptance that it deserved or should have received. Despite its slow growth, it somehow managed to mark Pakistani society by performing diverse themes and issues like dictatorial rule and social taboos. However, it faced some severe censorship from the state. *The Curtain Raiser Production*, an Islamabad-based theatrical group, was used as a case study to address the dynamics of censorship in the theater. The approach was critical and analytical, while the methodology was qualitative. For this purpose, the drama, *Sarisht* of *The Curtain Raiser Production* was analyzed to identify the key factors which led to changes in the play. The same play with its original script was named *Nang*, which means shame; however, later, it was renamed *Sarisht*, which means nature or disposition. This change of title was the trigger for gaining attention about the effectiveness of the censor as a social practice. The script provided more profound insights into the censored world on rhetoric and performance. It highlighted the process through which censorship is enforced on the theatre practitioners. The article reveals that censor is omnipresent in the theater. It is multifaceted, polyvocal, and multidirectional.

*Keywords:* Theatre, Censorship, Culture, Performing Arts, Curtain Raiser

### **Theatre As Human Cultures**

The theater is understood as a cultural institution in Anthropology (Beeman, 1993). It can teach and train society and bring positive changes. Many scholars are writing to save the tradition and culture of theatre. Because theatre and performing arts directly influence the people. Its history dates to ancient times in Greek. Script, music, dance, costumes are the key elements that make an appealing theatre play. Theatre history observed many trends in the theatrical traditions, revolving through theological plays to ancient war dances, storytelling, stories of princes. Then there was an age of comedy plays during the early mid-years of the twentieth century. The trend of realistic theatre declined at that time. Furthermore, theatre artists started to try new experiments in drama art after the arrival of motion pictures.

Theatre is a decent way to disseminate ethical traditions and reason. Because live and performing illustrations can leave a long-lasting impact on a mind. Theatre is a unique field of art. Almost every county has theatrical art associated with a definite culture and ideology. Several features of theatre experiences are physical and tactile. Theatre develops numerous community services. Theatre also makes all the contestants share their thoughts and vitrine their imagination in whatever aspect possible. Generally, it was detected that people who were not probable to be linked with creativeness amazed everyone by their existence of mind. Theatre shows people to discover more, face new experiments, and have the capability to adjust to moving situations.

### **A Mode of Education**

Theatre is the earliest mode of education because it was used to educate people from ancient times. The earliest themes were used to teach people about religion and social norms. Theatre has been an influential factor in many peoples' lives. Creativity can flourish, academics can improve, and self-expression can be developed. It is essential to have mandatory theater classes because when a student participates, they benefit significantly in exploring the new or hidden ability to act. Participating in theater classes can stimulate students' creativity and thought processes. The whole experience of theatre makes people more aware and sensitive towards various issues. It empowers the weak and makes people do away with their reservations.

### **A Creative Industry**

The positioning of theatre in the creative industry has a strong game, people linked to this industry earn very well. They are making the soul and body both happy. The art and theatre industries are making a success story in the UK. Film, television, social media, theatre, games, and music give £110 billion per year to the country. The industries mostly look for the artistic ones to participate in the rising economy of the globe.

Consequently, there is much scope for art and theatre in the economy. In mature nations, there are good training institutes that offer proper training and teaching about the technicalities of performing arts. The most striking aspect of theatre training is to realize determination and self-belief. For example, in a case study, the students were asked to enact a paralyzed characters who could only push a glass of water using their face. This exercise infused a belief that it does not matter how scarce the resources are at your disposal. One can consistently achieve whatever he wants if he is determined and focused. (Harrington, 2018).

### **A Cultural Resource**

Cultural resources are significant assets in the whole process of theatrical work and representation. Theatre is an entire field of art. Almost every region has theatrical art linked with the specific culture and ideology. Western and Eastern theatres have different categories. There are four key forms of theatre. The group of performers gather their audience and attracts them with their performance. It can also be called theatre in the round, flexible stage, black box stage, proscenium stage, and amphitheaters are the rest of the forms of the theatres.

Culture is the critical essence and an asset to theatrical art. The artists utilize the masks, costumes, background, language, and even the subject of the theatre. In addition, they use the tradition of dance and music to amuse the audience.

### **The Genesis of Censorship and Morality in Performing Arts**

Every society has its morality that regulates societal life. Therefore, censorship is omnipresent and inherent in every community. The theater is a vital part of any society; hence, censorship as an integral part of theater is regulated and operated in socially relative terms. The genesis of censorship and morality in performing arts is linked with the ideology of a nation. Therefore, ideology is crucial in drawing the limits of ethics in art. Trends and time also play a role.

In the West, in classical times, the content of nudity and inappropriate comics was not trendy and acceptable, but they grew those trends over time. Now the West drama and theatre are much bolder compared to the East. There is a dance tradition in India and a part of the culture. In comparison, in Pakistan, theatre is still working under the strict policies of censorship.

Contemporary Pakistani commercial theater faces criticism that the theater is promoting vulgarity. So, censorship through public rhetoric and other direct or indirect means is essential for the theater.

In this article, censorship practices in theatre are addressed with the case study of The Curtain Raiser and its play *Sarisht*. It relied on primary sources. First, the author interviewed the writer Imran Khan and director of the play Muhammad Ali Farooqi, who defined the whole process of censorship faced by the drama team. Script of the play *Nang* and *Sarisht* were used as the primary source to address the issue of censorship and how it affects the original shape of theatrical art, and answer how society and culture regulate the censorship in performing arts, particularly for contemporary youth theater? Moreover, how is the freedom of expression and the societal morality interplay to guide the playwright or dramatist?

The author collected the secondary data from newspapers which published about concerning events and about the play *Sarisht* and consulted some classic accounts like The *Natayshastra* of Bharat, translated by Manmohan Ghosh about the history and tradition of theatre in India, and A Cultural History of Theatre in Antiquity, edited by Martin Revermann; Pakistani Theatre: A Unique Cultural Form of South Asia by Ahmad Bilal University of Punjab; Chronicling Pakistan's Art Movements from Traditional to Contemporary: 1960–2011 by Kanwal Syed and Sarena Abdullah; A Short Organum for the Theatre by Bertolt Brecht, and Mapping South Asia through Contemporary Theatre Essays on the Theatres of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka Edited by Ashis Sengupta.

### **Ethnographic Case Study of the Curtain Raiser Production**

The Curtain Raiser is a platform for social awareness and the process of social growth through theatre, founded by a student. The basic notion of this organization is to relive the

tradition of meaningful theatre and the promotion of art. In addition, the organization presents a motivational message for social awakening through art and culture.

This organization aims to promote intercultural harmony with the help of theater that leads towards moderate society, tolerance, respect, and freedom of speech. The organization encourages its audience to become self-determined thinkers to become socially responsible and active community members. They intend a tolerant, harmonized, peaceful, and flexible society. They wish Pakistan to be a pluralistic society that accepts ethnic, ideology, and faith differences and shows tolerance for peaceful coexistence.

#### **Goals of The Curtain Raiser**

The team of the Curtain Raiser promotes art and culture to build a society where there is no oppression and exploitation by highlighting the cheerful pose of the society and utilizing the differences of culture, languages, and ideas. Furthermore, by aiming to promote coexisting, they aim to normalize meaningful theatre.

There are different categories in their main proficiencies, including theatre, street theatre, events regarding culture and actions, event management, video making, and short films and Radio Plays programs. In addition, they conduct training for new artists. Their creative approach is collaborating with both audio and visual art. It is an effective way to merge the ideas for the spectators. Every step is required to be considered many times in pre-production. Their main goal is to introduce theme-based and meaningful drama and rebuild the base of education in theatrical traditions.

### **Planning and Thought Process**

The foundation of their creative approach is focused on content. After collecting the multidisciplinary concepts with their project companions, they start their working and innovative progression. After that, they design the pertinent and required script of the message that needs to be promoted and conveyed via theatre. Then they submerge the content provided by the project partners or the research fellows. Finally, after the complete consideration and construction of content to be present or performed, they take further steps and decisions to play it in the best way.

Next, they develop the production ways to look for the solutions to specific problems and unanswered points. For the creation of the production timetable next step is to do every single action according to budget. They are looking up all details about the concerning theme and content and effectiveness of the storyline on the audience they practically set up for the play. The Curtain Raiser has its strategic way of work. The Curtain Raiser is an organization that is linked to performing arts, founded by a group of young scholars. The central theme of this platform is to give an impression of educated and organized performing arts with a piece. All these students belong to well-reputed universities. They are well-experienced artists who are thriving to bring positive change to society. The fellows in the team have won many awards at the national level. They are nominated numerous times in the whole country.

### **Censoring Practices in Theatre**

The following paragraphs summarize the interviews conducted throughout the study and the results.

The Curtain Raiser, the emerging youth theatre, has performed on various prestigious drama festivals and has earned a good name in the theatre industry. One of its popular dramas is

*Sarisht*. It is a 60-minute play based on a true story. The play is about a middle-aged woman who arranges meetings between clients and prostitutes. The story reveals how her family has forcefully put into prostitution in partition catastrophe through the flashback technique.

Theatre in Pakistan is struggling. One of the critical factors in this regard is censorship in theatre. The Pakistani theatre has always been subjected to censorship, affecting its progress and growth. Censorship in theatre has been present and practiced since the inception of creative arts. Censorship in Pakistan is no exception. The author believes there must be a check and balance on the policies and their implementation regarding Censorship in Theatre. The writer, director, or producer of a drama must keep the local traditions and norms in mind. He must respect all of them. Many people call up for freedom of expression. However, it does not mean that the play's producers forget the limitations of this art form and the people & audience associated with it. Furthermore, it is proposed that the state provide an adequate environment, facilities, and training for the theatre practitioners to produce positive content that is acceptable for all segments and cultures of society.

Many insights could lead to conclusions about the social and cultural side of censorship at different stages of the theater drama production. The first stage of censorship is to appropriate the labels and names that are potent for attracting the audience and masses, often without offending their cultural sensitivities. The next censorship phase is dialogues, vernacular, slang, and metaphors. The context conditions these dialogues, and contextuality is borrowed from the society. However, the willingness of society to accept the contextuality is conditional. Thus, the representational challenges are frequently faced during the dialogue because they may have positional challenges from religious, ethnic, sectarian, gender, or other perspectives.



There are performance challenges where appropriated dress and props require social approval. The symbolic significance and representational contest are at play during this stage. Censoring goes a long way as the performance needs an audience, which might be selected or restricted.

This junction of censor practice is visible in the theater culture of Islamabad. Most theaters sell or distribute the tickets for their performances to certain community cadres. The maturity of the audience is judged. Thus, it is easy to conclude that censor is omnipresent in the theater. It is multifaceted, polyvocal, and multidirectional.

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