Performative Interventions in the Body Politic of Pakistan

Fawzia Afzal-Khan

The texts in this section are gathered here in TDR for one important reason: they shed light on an area of the world that has become critically important to the West in general and the United States in particular. They include boxed statements throughout this article on “parallel” or alternative theatre by leading Pakistani practitioners (Sheema Kirmani, Shahid Nadeem, the latter also an award-winning playwright); and on popular music and its instantiations of class and gender (Ahmed Naumann); as well as Claire Pamment’s essay on different aspects of theatre and gendered politics; and my own play, staged in New York City as Jihad Against Violence, with an earlier incarnation as Sext of Saudade, both collaborations with other women in a multicultural yet neoimperial space—the United States—and both reproduced here in their entirety.
In its search for a cultural identity as apart from the cultural identity of India, Pakistan has looked upon the art of dancing with suspicion. It has continuously been claimed by the official authorities that dance is not part of Pakistani culture. The reason for this being that dance has always been an essential and integral part of Indian life and culture, and Pakistanis felt that they must have a separate and a "New" culture.

—Sheema Kirmani

The post-9/11 “War on Terror” has increasingly focused on Afghanistan and neighboring Pakistan. In fact, both geographically and culturally, the border between the two nations is porous. Pakistan, as we know, became an important ally in the US-led War on Terror when the military dictator General Pervez Musharraf (then President) vowed to President George W. Bush that he would root out the Pakistani Taliban. This branch of the Taliban, as a result of US policies since the 1980s, had become the proverbial “chickens coming home to roost.” But despite efforts to eliminate it, the Pakistani Taliban (also now known as the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, or the Pakistani Taliban Movement) continues to organize raids across the Pakistani North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) border into Afghanistan where they battle NATO troops fighting the Afghan Taliban. The Pakistani-US war against Afghan Taliban, going on since 9/11, is an increasingly hopeless struggle because many Afghans sympathize with, if not actively support, the Taliban and remnants of Al-Qaeda, who are seen as nationalists or Afghan sympathizers fighting against US imperialist hegemony in the region. The Afghan Taliban are helped by some elements within the Pakistani army and the sympathetic Pakhtun population on the Pakistani side of the border.

Until the 1980s, when the United States supported the proxy war in Afghanistan against the Soviet Union, Pakistan had been a relatively moderate Muslim state. The USSR was driven from Afghanistan by locally recruited and trained Islamist militants then called the Mujahideen (freedom fighters) and now the Taliban (literally, “students”). This moniker is apt because the Taliban were trained in madrassas, Islamic schools, across much of Pakistan. In the 1980s, the madrassas were funded by the Saudis with American support. Pakistani madrassas became a haven for foreign jihadists from Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and other Middle Eastern countries. These militants recruited many jihadists from the local impoverished and illiterate population of Pakistan’s northern tribal areas. After 9/11, these recruits learned that the War on Terror was a battle for the soul of Islam pitting the “true” believers against the immoral and power-hungry imperialist forces of the West, particularly the United States, aided and abetted by the corrupt neocolonial and “un-Islamic” ruling elites of Pakistan.

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It is against this backdrop that Sheema Kirmani, Shahid Nadeem, Ahmed Naumann, and Claire Pamment make an effective argument about the anti-cultural, anti-performance, anti-art policies of the Pakistani state. This Muslim state has from its creation in 1947, with the partition of colonial India, been ideologically hostile to the performing arts. Theatre, dance, and music are anti-Islamic to the Islamist orthodox. Kirmani and Nadeem argue that the state's rejection of, or hostility toward, the performing arts has been an effective tool for legitimizing illegitimate anti-democratic military and civilian regimes (see Boxes 1 and 2).

It was during this decade of the 1980s that avowedly political theatre groups like Tehrik-i-Niswan (The Women's Movement; see Box 3) and Ajoka (Dawn of a New Day; see Box 4) were formed in Karachi and Lahore by Sheema Kirmani and Madeeha Gauhar (later joined by Shahid Nadeem), respectively. Both of these theatre groups—which spawned many other local variants (see Afzal-Khan 2005)—produced plays on themes ranging from the oppression of women (especially under Zia-ul-Haq's Islamization drive), the erosion of minority rights, the oppression of labor, and so on.

From its inception, Ajoka was fighting on two fronts: against the mullah-military nexus and for the promotion of peace between India and Pakistan (on the latter see Box 5). These fronts were interrelated as the fight for a secular and prosperous Pakistan could not be achieved without redefining the Pakistan ideology vis-à-vis India and liberating social and economic forces from the clutches of mullahs and the military by forging close links with India. The battles on the military-mullah-class-gender front included plays on issues such as discriminatory

The Partition of India in 1947 turned communal hatred, historical distortion, and religious stereotyping into an ideology; and created tensions and disputes that have caused two devastating wars, the break-up of the country, and repeated imposition of martial law. I will also stress that by cutting itself off from India, Pakistan surrendered a large part of united India's rich cultural heritage and was forced to create a Pakistan ideology. Pakistan began looking to the West in order to find a cultural identity different from India, but the natural cultural bonds could never be broken by government propaganda and indoctrination. This “Islamic Ideology” of Pakistan was aggressively imposed in all walks of life during the military rule of General Zia-ul-Haq in the 1980s.

—Shahid Nadeem

The year 2005 saw over a hundred performances of Tehrik-i-Niswan's street theatre. Aakhir Kyun?—based on true incidents and case studies of women killed in the name of honor—was part of a year-long campaign against the cruel and criminal custom of "honor killing." Honor killing—the killing of men and women in the name of honor—occurs in many parts of the world. In Pakistan thousands of women of all ages are killed by the men in their own families, on one pretext or another. [For example, for not having brought a big enough dowry, resulting in stove-burnings; or for bringing dishonor to the family's men by asserting romantic desire for a man, etc. Often false charges of fornication or adultery are brought against a woman to allow the men in the family to claim her share of the property.] The men claim that they killed the woman to protect their honor, while the actual motive of the killings in most cases is either greed or revenge or the desire for a new wife. Most of these cases go unreported and the majority of perpetrators go unpunished. Tehrik created this play out of workshops with members of communities who had been in direct contact with or who themselves had managed to escape this horrific trauma.

—Sheema Kirmani
laws against women (Barri, 1987), persecution of minorities (Dekh Tamasha Chalta Ban, 1992), repression of workers (ITT, 1988), and attempts to impose an ultraconservative interpretation of Islam on the society (Burqavaganza, 2007). By “turning to the ambiguous and uncertain rhetoric of Islam” (Nadeem 2009) as a legitimizing force, Pakistan’s ruling elite have done a disservice to the Pakistani people, according to both Kirmani and Nadeem.

In discussing the formation and cultural/artistic contributions of Ajoka—of which he is the in-house playwright and his wife Madeeha Gauhar is the founder and director)—Nadeem often demonstrates the confused yet calculating manipulation of Islamic rhetoric and ideology that has led Pakistan to the edge of a cultural wasteland threatening to swallow up the nation-state and its peoples. Describing Ajoka’s Hotel Mohenjodaro (which I saw performed in June 2008 in Islamabad amidst tight security two months before the devastating suicide bombing that wrought havoc on the guests and workers at the Marriott Hotel), Nadeem tells us:

Hotel Mohenjodaro is based on a short story written in the 1960s by Urdu writer Ghulam Abbas, which prophetically describes the present state of affairs in Pakistan and the disastrous consequences when religious fundamentalists take over the country. The play is disturbing but the reality is even more shocking. It is uncanny and unnerving to see the country being torn apart onstage metaphorically, and to know that what is happening outside is no different. Ajoka and its audience are participating in these performances at the risk of attracting the ire of suicide bombers who roam about in the metropolises. In the 1980s, when the audience came to watch Ajoka’s Jaloos, they were making a statement against the fundamentalist military rule. Today, after 25 years, those who come to watch Hotel Mohenjodaro or Burqavaganza [the latter play’s first scheduled performance was delayed by the government of President Musharraf, probably for fear of giving offense to the Mullah class who protested against its satire of the practice of veiling] are also making a statement against the insane and very dangerous Taliban fanatics. But the two allies, the actors and the audience, have to hold hands and persevere to keep the show going, and hoping that theatre will bring about a change. (Nadeem 2009)

While the ban on Burqavaganza was never enacted, the fact that it was passed in April 2007 by a government under pressure from the mullah class, and the performance held up for several months, indicates the seriousness with which art and performance are treated by the Pakistani government and its allies as threats to the status quo, even as they are publicly reviled or looked down on as frivolous activities.

Ajoka was formed in 1984 in Lahore when General Zia-ul-Haq’s military regime was at its oppressive peak. The theatre company’s objectives from the very beginning included striving “for a just, egalitarian and democratic Pakistan.” Ajoka’s first play was Jaloos, written by Indian socialist playwright/director Badal Sircar (see Mitra 2004). The radical political message of the play, conveyed through an innovative form [theatre-in-the-round], caused a stir in the culture-starved city of Lahore. The independent print media, especially the English papers, gave very positive reviews and announced the arrival of “alternative” theatre in Pakistan. In the beginning, Ajoka’s performances were held in a house lawn as no theatre hall owner was willing to provide the venue for plays that were critical of the military regime and raised issues such as fundamentalism and war-mongering. The intelligence agencies did register their presence at the performances (though they were not advertised in the press and were by invitation only) and the founders of the group were harassed and victimized. Later Ajoka was able to find a safe haven in the Goethe Institute, Lahore, where it built a mud open-air stage and performed its plays there for the next 13 years.

—Shahid Nadeem
While Pakistan has not yet been taken over by religious fundamentalists—after all, a secular, democratic government was installed in February 2008 after a decade of military rule—Nadeem's assessment is nevertheless not far from the truth when it comes to the terrorizing abilities of jihadists to disrupt and evoke, the specter of a possible takeover of the state by Islamist forces. There has been a rise in suicide bombings against civilians—as evidenced in the attack against the Sri Lankan cricket team in Lahore on 3 March 2009, the mosque bombing in Khyber Pass on 27 March 2009, and the attempted takeover of a police academy on the outskirts of Lahore on 30 March 2009. With this surge in terror attacks and in the wake of the fall in March 2009 of the Swat Valley (known as the Paradise of Pakistan) to the Tehrik-i-Taliban militants led by Baitullah Mehsud (who has been reported killed by a US drone attack in August 2009), it is clear that the Pakistani state and citizenry are being held hostage by an extremist fringe.

In her essay on the transvestite and transgendered community of hijra performers in Pakistan, Pamment shifts our gaze to performative resistance against the corrupt civilian ruling elites of the country, who are also in need of being challenged along with the mullah-military nexus. The hijras offer hilariously biting critiques of Pakistani social mores, politicians, and others who have a stake in maintaining the status quo by performing their own unorthodox lifestyles, and whose post-Partition lives are similarly bifurcated along Indian/Pakistani or Hindu/Muslim lines. While the hijras' performative work can be read thus as resistance to elite culture, their lived realities as members of a disparaged group are nevertheless sad. Pakistani hijras, who identify with the state religion of Islam, do not draw upon a previous Hindu history in which they (like Pakistan itself) are imbricated, but rather trace their own history to the more recent khwajasaras (eunuchs) of the Mughal courts, and in this way, shortchange, to some degree, the power their critique could derive by situating itself at the margins of an even more bifurcated and amorphous identity. As Pamment suggests:
In these texts [Hindu texts like the *Mahabharata*], while the third gender [which could be that of a hijra, and is often synonymous with one in the subcontinental idiom] is assigned low social status, in its alignment with ascetic sacrifice (by renouncing sex) it develops divine auspices. As such, Nanda notes that hijras’ “sacred powers are contingent upon their asexuality” (1986:35). (Pamment 2010:32)

Music, particularly as performed by women, has been sorely neglected in Pakistani scholarship. Again, this is hardly surprising, given that the performing arts in general, but music and dance in particular, are seen as un-Islamic. Ahmed Naumann, an engineer by profession who runs his own radio show broadcasting traditional and contemporary Pakistani music in the Twin Cities, Minnesota, observes the same dearth of female—or more pointedly “feminist”—vocal presence in Pakistan, be it radio, television, film, or stage. He does note some exceptions, like Munni Begum, Naghmana Jafari, and Fawzia Afzal-Khan (see Box 7). In his research on the history of popular musical performance, Naumann casts an eye at the effects of a repressive society on the development or lack thereof of musical performance in Pakistan, particularly as regards the contributions of female artists, who nevertheless challenge the status quo in different ways.

Qalandar Bux Memon, founding editor of the journal *Naked Punch Asia*, underscores the performative power of street activism, as witnessed during the Pakistani Lawyers Movement of 2007/08:

Who are these black-coated lawyers? These dancing, whirling, singing lawyers, who face the stones of abuse, these “intoxicated ones”—who are they? Who are these murdered, tear-gassed, beaten, slandered lawyers? Let me answer simply: they are “hope.” If one were to answer politically, then they are the “vanguard.” If the answer is to be historical, then they are today’s Inayats, today Mansurs, today’s Jalibs, today’s Faizs, today’s Sahirs, today’s “lovers.” (Memon 2009)

One can indeed argue that there is a precedent for the activism of the Pakistan Lawyers Movement (which succeeded in ousting a dictator backed by the US) in the revolutionary poetry, often inspired by the Sufi ethos of the land, sung and performed in Pakistan at every political critical juncture:

Socially and politically inclined music has had a continuing presence in Pakistan. In the early days much of it originated as ghazals (poems written in Urdu adhering to a specific structure of rhyme and rhythm), presented in mushairas (poetry readings) and sometimes subsequently sung by ghazal singers. Some of the most noted poets of Pakistan penned poems critical of the government. An example of a highly political poem chafing against a military government is “Hum dekhain gay” (We Shall See) written by Faiz Ahmed Faiz and sung by the accomplished singer Iqbal Bano. This was written sometime in the early 1980s, during the days of General Zia ul-Haq who had taken over the Pakistani government in a military coup in the late 1970s. Soon after assuming power, Zia began to push for the “Islamization” of Pakistan by promoting Islamic (*shariah*) laws. Interestingly, Faiz draws upon Islamic metaphors and terminology to prophesy the end of the military regime. This piece by Faiz gained considerable currency in the urban, educated, over-30 circles but not much beyond that. However, during the later years of General Pervez Musharraf’s regime, almost two decades later, the poem became popular once again.

(NAumann 2009)

Indeed, its recitation became part and parcel of citizens’ gatherings protesting the Zia regime; one such was an evening of song by Iqbal Bano, the popular female ghazal singer, who gave a rousing rendition of “Hum Dekhain Gay” at the Alhamra Arts Council in the spring of 1987 to thunderous applause and fist-waving by a packed audience of at least 400 people during the heyday of Zia ul-Haq’s rule; he was killed in a mysterious air crash in August of the following year.
Similarly, in the fall of 2007, in the days following the declaration of Emergency Rule by then-dictator Pervez Musharraf, many socially active groups of concerned citizens took to performing this song by Faiz at various places despite the ban on public gatherings. Working with members of a leading Pakistani Women’s NGO, Shirkat Gah, I myself was part of a disparate band of older and younger women and a few men to stage Happenings in crowded spaces like the Jinnah Bagh (park) on the Mall Road of Lahore, where we would set out a loudspeaker and start singing revolutionary songs, including “Hum Dekhain Gay.” After the song we would disperse before the police arrived. Many dozens of us sang this and other revolutionary poems and songs in front of the Geo Television Station on Davis Road where candlelight vigils were held following the assassination of Benazir Bhutto and the ban on Geo’s news reporting by Musharraf’s government.

It seems to me that the questions raised by some of the current practitioners and observers/analysts of the Pakistani political and performative scene indicate both the vibrancy of art, despite its being under attack for most of the 60-odd years of Pakistani postcolonial independence, and the ability of artists to act as visionaries and even catalysts for progressive change and a better future for all.

For example, Pamment’s research into the Hindu antecedents of Pakistani-Muslim transgendered and transvestite communities calls into question essentialist notions of identity, suggesting connections between a female Muslim mystic of the 8th century CE (Rabia al-Adawiyya) and an avatar of a Hindu goddess (Mata Bahuchara), both sources for a transformative understanding of hijraism. This new understanding could bridge the ideological divide between Hinduism and Islam, India and Pakistan, man and wo/man. Such a healing of divides would alter the balance of patriarchal, class, and gendered power in the region.

Memon and Naumann’s work suggests, from different performative angles, just such a shifting balance of class and gender power within the Pakistani polity. Memon proffers a poetic analysis of the transformative power of the two-year-long political performance of the Pakistani Lawyers Movement for the “Restoration of the Judiciary and Rule of Law”—one of their rallying cries. He grounds the appeal of this movement not only in its commitment to the ideals of grassroots democracy that draws its power from the people, but also to the power of revolutionary acts performed through galvanizing verses of both the progressive, secular poets of post-Partition Pakistan and the iconoclastic Sufi poets of India. The question is: If the secular Lawyers Movement could harness the will of hundreds of thousands of Pakistanis demanding the reinstatement of the Chief Justice illegally ousted by President Musharraf in 2007, a struggle that finally succeeded in March 2009, can similar speech acts coalesce into a citizens’ movement against the Talibanization of Pakistan?

What adds yet another layer to the paradoxical nature of theatrical activity in Pakistan today is the rise of English-language musical theatre over the past five years or so. Shah Sharabeel’s name has become associated with what Pakistani blogger Abdullah Shahid calls “quality theatre in English”: “I don’t have to think twice when it comes to a Shah Sharabeel production. His name has become synonymous with quality English theater. I run to see the play as soon as possible” (2009).
**Tom, Dick and Harry** is a Pakistani adaptation of British playwright Ray Cooney's comedic play of the same name, which played at London's West End Duke of York Theatre in 2005. Sharabeel's production ran for two weeks from 7 through 16 August 2009 at Islamabad's PNCA Auditorium—right behind the Marriott Hotel that was the target of the September 2008 suicide bombing. The trailer for the show on YouTube\(^1\) begins with a bizarre dance scene of the characters prancing about to a soundtrack that sounds like a mixture of American pop music and **bhangra**—now a popular genre often blended with other popular genres that originated in Punjab at harvest festivals. The play revolves around the arrival of a Mrs. Potter from an adoption agency to evaluate the three brothers who are the main characters, to see if they are suitable for becoming adoptive parents. The play also had a run earlier at Lahore's famed Alhamra Arts Council, where it was billed as family entertainment, and indeed the audiences at the first two performances were made up of hundreds of families (see *Daily Times* 2009). Dance skits and Punjabi language interventions were added to the English script to add “authenticity” to the piece for Pakistani audiences. A major sponsor of the production was Warid Telecom, the Bangladesh cell phone company. According to an essay on a Telecom website, “Pakistan has an improved business environment; it is evident from considerable inward investment in the telecoms sector over the last few years” (see Telecom 2008). Clearly, the “authentic” Pakistani being appealed to by Sharabeel’s productions is a sophisticated, cell-phone-toting man or woman who is equally at home in the English language as in Pakistani idioms of song and dance.

Sharabeel has produced other popular Broadway musical extravaganzas such as *Phantom of the Opera* and *Moulin Rouge*, as well as *Bombay Dreams*. While the local actors are all untrained amateurs, they are required to rehearse every day for six weeks, from 6:00 PM till 2:00 AM.\(^2\) Most press reviews praise the production (see Carreiro 2009); the singing is all CD playback, and no one seems to care about copyright issues (see Isani 2009).

Nida Butt, a human-rights lawyer who is now a (self-trained) actress, director, and choreographer in Karachi, recently produced a shocking (because of its female body-baring aspect), sold-out production of the musical *Chicago*, in summer 2008, with a second and third run later on, the last run of performances being in Lahore—with girls baring legs (Isani 2009). As Sahar Ahmed reports in “Despite Bombs, *Chicago* Razzle-Dazzles in Pakistan”: “The play […] features the actresses in short, revealing dresses” (Ahmed 2009). Nida Butt confesses, “You are scared but you cannot stop doing what you love” (in Isani 2009).

This is especially brave—or foolhardy, depending upon your perspective—in a country that has seen many theatres and other cultural spaces become bombing targets in the past few years. In January 2009 for example “six small explosions went off outside theatres in Lahore, Pakistan’s cultural centre, wounding at least five people. These follow three small blasts that went off outside another cultural centre in the same city in November” (Ahmed 2009).

What is interesting to note in these latest examples is the use of mind-numbing Western commercial musical fare to represent a challenge to the Taliban and Al-Qaeda brand of Islamist regression that has become the hallmark of the Pakistani state apparatus in recent years. Of course, this is an ironic twist to the cultural imperialism unleashed on the inhabitants of this subcontinent through centuries of colonial rule by the British, and followed in our times by the neoimperialism of the United States. This English-language confectionary genre stands in marked contrast to the self-styled theatre and performance of social awareness and pride in a return to a nativist aesthetic, represented by groups like Ajoka and Tehrik-i-Niswan.

Nevertheless, this particular twist on postmodern colonial mimicry speaks to yet another dimension of the politics of performance and performance of artistic power.

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1. See the trailer at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=nYhGFt2U8rE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nYhGFt2U8rE).
2. See Farrah Hussain’s interview with Shah Sharabeel at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=gbAOv_JPYqc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gbAOv_JPYqc).
Of course, the most dangerous space where the politics of piety has performed its particular postmodern dance of vengeance and death within the corrupt, neoliberal body politic of Pakistan has been the sacred space of the mosque, specifically what came to be known as the Red Mosque. In the Lal Masjid of Islamabad, female seminarians captured the world’s attention through their stick-wielding antics behind burqas—otherwise referred to with a mixture of revulsion and fascination by the well-heeled elites of Pakistan as the “Chicks with Sticks.” According to Giorgio Agamben ([2003] 2005), modern Western democracies have wrestled with what he calls the “state of exception” since World War I, in which what was considered to be outside of the law threatens to become the very condition of maintaining the law of governance, even after the state of “crisis” that provokes the “state of exception” has passed. Under such conditions, boundaries of power become precarious and destabilize both the law and the very humanity of the state’s citizens, especially those who are pushed to the margins of society and outside the orbit of state power. The state of exception, according to Agamben, has increasingly become the rule. In societies like Pakistan where martial law regimes have indeed become the rule rather than the exception, “the government will have more power and the people fewer rights” (Rossiter [1948] 2004:5).

Pakistani music has featured both male and female artists but there has not been a notable feminist perspective or assertive female presence in the last 60 or so years. While Munni Begum’s work cannot be considered to be explicitly feminist, the tone of her songs, many dealing with alcohol or challenging the mullah and social conventions, is noticeably assertive. [...] The same songs sung by male singers would not attract comment; the fact that few other female singers have rendered these songs is what makes Munni Begum stand out.

Another, and more clear-cut case of an assertive female presence is that of Naghmana Jaffry. She definitely projects what could be called grrl power, if not feminism. (The fact that she is wearing a leopard-skin-print shirt and a pair of pants with a tiger head in her picture on the back cover of one of her CDs seems to be a feminist statement of sorts.) The title track from her CD Main Hoon Magroor Laila, “Laila,” is a clear assertion of the primacy and self-confidence of a strong and independent woman: “I am proud Laila / [Beautiful as the] light of the moon / No one will be able to capture this Laila” (Jaffry 2003). Following this CD she released a second called Goli Mar De. While the title track features the usual pop theme of romantic love, it turns the tables by voicing the perspective of a woman who knows what she wants and makes her own choices: “I don’t need love / Listen to me / Just as Majnoon was ruined / Just so will I ruin you / I am not going to give you my heart / Even if you shoot me” (Jaffry 2006). Another track, “Pyar Ka Nasha Hoon,” recapitulates the “Laila” theme of a woman forcefully asserting her beauty and control. A third track, “Sarak Chap Larke,” again makes the woman the party who calls the shots in a male-female relationship: “Everyone here [claims to be] a lover / All the boys are crazy [about me] / Who should I [choose to] give my heart to / Who should I [pick to] love / Each one of them is ready to give me his heart” (Jaffry 2006).

Yet another artist who is pushing the envelope of social convention is Fawzia Afzal-Khan. Her theatre performances and the few music videos that she has produced challenge a spectator’s preconceived notions of what Pakistani (and Muslim) women are supposed to be like. In live performances, the boldness of her statement coupled with the edginess of the material she uses disturbs audiences—especially in a restrained society like Pakistan. The music videos that she has released don’t have a blatant message but rather they quietly distort the signals one would unconsciously be expecting to receive. Her music video Smokescreen features a romantic song but the graphical portion plays out like a cinematic spy story set in disturbed conditions referencing the political turmoil towards the end of the regime of President Musharraf in 2007.

—Ahmed Naumann
Indeed, the Pakistani state, aided and abetted by the imperial Western powers—that-be, has for most of its 60-odd years of existence wielded its power to virtually exclude the majority of the population, the millions who have remained at best the metaphorical cockroaches of the ruling classes’ imaginaries, and as such, have become the embodiment of a state of exception, mounting their resistance to the system that excludes them, reducing their existence to “bare life” through their Talibanistic performative utterances and acts. Suicide bombings, burqa-clad chicks wielding sticks and burning video and music shops, considered harbingers of Western-inspired pornography and human debasement—these become the answer to Agamben’s question, “what does it mean to act politically?” when the stakes involved in challenging the difference between the juridical and the political, between law and the living being, remain metaphorically, and quite literally, veiled ([2003] 2005:2).

As the veiled Umm Hassan (wife of the recently released head cleric of the Red Mosque) concluded during an interview I held with her a few days before the Pakistani Army surrounded the Mosque in July 2007, killing by several accounts 300 young women and men inside the male and female seminaries, “We need economists schooled in the University of the Prophet. What need do we have of PhDs from abroad when our own folks cannot find decent jobs?” As if to drive home her insult to me properly, she pointed out, “300 people commit suicide on average every month. Because,” she explained fixing her stare on me, “they have no jobs” (Afzal-Khan 2007). Hmm... I thought back to my earlier conversation with Ghazi Sahib, and the figure he had cited was 3,000 suicides annually. (I am referring to Ghazi Rashid, brother-in-law to Umm Hassan, who was killed, along with Umm Hassan’s 23-year-old son, during the army operation a week later.) Interested to note that it is virtually impossible to get accurate figures about suicide since such data is not, and never has been, systematically collected by any agency, government or otherwise. But clearly, she had a point: “the elite classes of this country think of the rural masses and the underclass simply as cockroaches, as chipkalis” (2007). And her point to me was this: Lady, this conflict is about class. These performances of suicidal/murderous piety, versus those of secularist postmodernity, are always already a sly mimicry of capitalism’s nihilistic modernity. These gestures of “authenticity” (to Islamic purity in the case of the religious extremists, or to native folk culture and language in the case of the secular activists such as Ajoka)—or their penchant for “copying” (as in the case of the English-language theatrical revivals)—are all points on a continuum that begs to dismantle the ridiculous East/West binary at the very moment that it upholds it and fights against it, while the power differential between and within these unequal spaces and stages is the tick-tocking heart, the time-bomb of the performative “real.”

It is to bring this performance of the real, that is, to bring the heart of Pakistan “home” to those TDR readers living in the so-called West, that I include two versions of a playscript: Sext of Saudade, which I co-wrote and performed with Annie Lanzillotto, an Italian American, working-class self-styled “butch” from the Bronx; and Jihad Against Violence, which I co-wrote and performed with Bina Sharif. In the first iteration, the Brechtian impulse is evident, in an attempt to make the audience and actors uncomfortable within their own skins; to trouble their life choices and the moment of cultural, religious, and gendered collision, desire, and misreading that marks our time—our “state of exception.” In the second version of the play, written and performed by two Pakistani American Muslim women, the Pakistani pasts and the American presents of both writers and performers intertwine to bring out questions of patriarchy, nation, gender, and transnational violence. Jihad Against Violence is a poetic memory-play meant to jolt us out of our complacency with violence in our lives, violence both “here” and “there.” Sharif and I speak to issues of Muslim womanhood in a patriarchal world, which may be similar to those of the “third” world in relation to the “first” in this, our neoimperial moment where we don’t know if we should cry or laugh, or maybe both. Or maybe, just maybe, we can dare to have the audacity to hope for change. We can’t go on, we must go on!

For a more complete description and analysis of my interview with Umm Hassan and Ghazi Abdul Rashid, see Afzal-Khan (2007).
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