



RESEARCH PAPER

Not for 'Respectable' Women: Attitudes towards Theatre in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

Theatre, and the performing arts in general, though popular in some circles, are virtually no-go areas for regular vocation not only for the religious-minded, but also for those looking to gain or maintain social credibility in the general public in Pakistan. Actors/ performers are routinely denigrated as bhand (jesters, buffoons) and tawaif (prostitutes). What explains these attitudes towards the performing arts? This paper traces the colonial origins and development of the tabooing of performing arts for women, as it simultaneously historicises (Muslim) attitudes towards theatre in the country. Our primary argument is that while different theatrical practices have existed across the Islamic world, orthodox opinions denouncing dramatic performance have generally prevailed when they have been consolidated by the social exigencies of virtue, propriety and decency within the larger matrix of the family, and the place/ space accorded to women in the family. Islam, in this sense, is not the primary determinant in perspectives on the dramatic arts, even though it infuses attitudes towards them with distaste. In this respect, we demonstrate that the historically material performer-prostitute conflation is deeply entangled with South Asian assumptions about theatre, and becomes self-perpetuating in the case of Pakistan.

Keywords: Theatre, Theatre and Islam, Prostitution, Respectability, Women on Display

Introduction

Broadly speaking, theatre is not a popular line of work or occupation for women (and to a certain degree, even men) from 'respectable' backgrounds in Pakistani society. 'Respectability', in our discussion of the performing arts, refers to 'the fact of being considered socially acceptable' (Oxford Learners Dictionaries, n.d.). The 'fact of being acceptable' prefigures an authority, institutions, or mechanisms of power that grant such acceptability. To gain this acceptability, the act, behaviour, or idea has to be amenable to prevalent discursive regimes. Of course, ideas on what is, and is not 'respectable', vary within and across cultures, and also across time. What was acceptable in the past may be beyond the pale today and vice versa. However, attitudes towards theatre in South Asia, specifically in Pakistan, demonstrate an ideological resilience. Predominant discourses in Pakistani society, we hold, are pedigreed to colonial social formations and also to surviving pre-colonial symmetries of power, both, in turn, transversed by the dictates of religion. These discourses demarcate the place/ space of women in society. Thus, as we shall shortly demonstrate, while Islam is not the primary determinant in attitudes towards the performing arts, the inclination to see theatre, film, dance and other forms of artistic expression, as 'Hindu', 'Western-inspired' and hence un-Islamic — and the women associated

with said vocations as 'bad' or 'loose' — is, and has been, a major contributory factor.

The phrase 'artistic expression' must also be clarified. Islamic calligraphy, decoration of tombs and shrines, and painting of mosques are all, broadly speaking, forms of expression that are artistic. Muslim paintings of caliphs, sultans, mystics, ordinary people, animals and inanimate objects survive and carry immense spiritual and cultural value for those who possess them. What is usually considered to be discouraged, if not proscribed, is secular expressive/aesthetic content, such as sculptures, dance and music. Even here, though, the brushstroke is broad since the 'hostility' towards aesthetic expression is not, and has not been, universal or historically uniform. Devotional forms of song, music and dance have been aligned with *sufi* practices, and continue to find not only acceptance but celebration in Low Church denominations, such as the Barelvi, in Pakistan. There is a parallel puritanical rejection of artistic expression in High Church schools such as the Deobandi and Salafi, often repeated in the admonitions of popular TV preachers such as Naik (2014). The point of departure however, is that even Low Church denominations usually balk at rhythmic movements of the human body for (kin)aesthetic or sensual pleasure. Thus, for the purposes of this study, 'artistic expression' denotes the expression of non-devotional feelings, which would include the secular, worldly, bodily, 'profane' even, through different forms of expression such as music, song, dance and enactment.

As we note that we are dealing in prevailing opinions and not in exceptions and omissions, which, in and of themselves, are robust and aplenty, we might return to the opening, and state that theatre and the secular performing arts (mime, puppetry, dance) are undesirable cultural products in an Islamist society. Our guiding assumption here is that Pakistan has been moving towards becoming such a society in the aftermath of the Afghan Jihad (1979 — 1988), even though it has not entirely given way to radicalism. We are not dissecting this radicalism for the High-Low Church divide, but note that even Low-Church denominations have become increasingly militant and assertive in their denunciation of 'un-Islamic' practices. But the performing arts are not held in the highest esteem by secular quarters either. Boys and girls from the socially mobile, Westernised middle-class may take up dramatics as a hobby, but not so often as a profession. Theatre does not pay well (if it pays at all!) in Pakistan, but the economic dimension is not the only disincentive. Theatre actors, musicians, and comic performers are often not regarded as legitimate professionals, and the trade is not a 'proper' or 'respectable' one.

Situating the Argument

The phrase 'theatre in Pakistan', perhaps does not convey the intricacies of cultural and political inheritance in a nation that came into being after the partition of British India in 1947. The term 'South Asia' is often employed in scholarship to suggest both the shared values and traditions, and also the many regional nuances across the subcontinent. We accept, and note in our study of theatre, the many commonalities at play here, but our purpose is precisely to highlight and expand on the specifically *Pakistani*; the *Pakistani-ness* of the situation, which we believe, merits an independent analysis. On this score, the present writing is a preliminary investigation in its chosen field. While it is not

exhaustive, we aim to utilise the opportunity to initiate a larger debate; one to which we aim to return shortly.

Theatre, its forms and their development, and the impediments faced by practitioners in Pakistan, have been discussed in existing scholarship. Afzal-Khan (1997) uses theatre as a node to investigate the relationship between the Pakistani state and its female citizens, focusing primarily on the repertoire of two street-theatre groups, Ajoka and Lok Raqs – a debate expanded by Rashid (2015). Mundrawala (2014) sees a persistence in the productions of theatre practitioners in Pakistan, even though their efforts have waxed and waned in the face of state oppression and changing international economic trends. In this sense, she believes, political/ activist theatre has given way to commercial productions in the country, a trend Kershaw (2013) notes on the global scale. Pamment (2017) takes up the ‘indigenous’ theatrical form of Punjab, *jugat bazi* or jesting, by the traditional *bhand* (jesters, buffoons), and the commercial transformations of *jugat bazi* in Punjabi theatre. She has also interpreted the gender dynamics and subversive potential of such performances, especially when they involve ‘dancing-girls’ who, sometimes, double as comics (2012). How discourses on South Asia and Islam are negotiated by dramatists has been demonstrated in Sengupta (2017) who anthologises play-scripts from across the Muslim world.

We, on the other hand, are interested primarily in the ‘other side’ of the equation, i.e. the rather cold-shouldered general response to the profession of theatre in Pakistan. This is not a quantitative analysis of audience-response to performance; it aims rather to understand, what we take to be, the general distaste for live dramatic performance, inasmuch as it is not held to be a ‘respectable’ profession for women. The present study abbreviates the variegated attitudes towards theatre in Pakistani society in its use of the term ‘hostile’. The general prevailing attitude towards the performing arts is *hostile* in that *hostility* denotes ‘strongly rejecting something’ and ‘making it difficult for something to happen or to be achieved’ (Oxford Learners Dictionaries, n.d.). Theatre has not been ‘strongly rejected’ by all quarters in Pakistan, but is certainly dwindling (not that it ever was a major industry) with the number of shows steadily on the decline (Ali, 2015, para. 3). To pile on the agony, theatre has been made ‘difficult to happen or achieve’ in recent years owing to deadly attacks by religious fundamentalists: in 2008, for instance, the Rafi Peer Theatre Festival was disrupted by coordinated terror attacks in Lahore (Ali, 2015, para. 6).

This article narrows in on social hostility to creative expression involving (kin) aesthetic performance (including both dramatic performance and dance). In particular, we will pick up one specific strand of hostility which involves women, and sees women on ‘display’ as unacceptable and un-Islamic. We hold that women performers destabilise entrenched norms, invoking hostility from gendered society, where such opposition is simultaneously permeated by religion. Faith or religion, as an inhibitory factor, is entangled in complex matrices of morality that seek to determine the place of and space accorded to women. Theatre violates established sanctities, and thus invokes the combined hostility of discursive regimes in the country.

The Colonial Inheritance

Theatre, in the hands of the natives, was the centre of suspicion from the beginning. In 1876, colonial authorities disrupted a dramatic performance of the National Theatre Company's *Gajadananda o Jubaraj* in Calcutta (ostensibly for being defamatory and seditious), following which an ordinance was promulgated banning 'certain dramatic performances, which [we]re scandalous, defamatory, seditious, obscene, or otherwise prejudicial to the public interest' (Neiti, 2021, para. 2). Raj-era penal codes, and those strikingly similar to them, are in force in Pakistan (see the Punjab Suppression of Prostitution Ordinance of 1961, for comparison). Such legislation is used increasingly to thwart political opposition, and also to stifle student activism, protests for the rights of women, religious/ethnic minorities, and transgender individuals. Government regulations have often been seen as a major cause of the decline of the performing arts, routinely invoked by state institutions in Pakistan to curb creative social commentary (Malik, 2010). To provide a glimpse of how cumbersome it is to stage a performance in the country, the production team is required to obtain a 'No Objection Certificate' or 'NOC' — an acronym which has come to stand for excessive red tape — from one government department, in addition to having the script vetted by another (Malik, 2010). Hence, we have a manifestation of *hostility* against creative expression, one that can be traced to colonial-era regulations on public performances.

Women associated with rights' movements and protests — usually confident and vocal, and of middle-class origin — are regularly accused of working for nefarious foreign interests, and of having dubious moral credentials (an accusation that can also be made against men but seems to lose its edge). In the backlash such women face for voicing their views, the Urdu term *churail* (witch or she-demon) is used as a euphemism for the stronger profanity *tawaif* (prostitute), notes Zia (2020). Of primary significance to our study is this bracketing of women on 'display' — either in the streets, or on TV screens, saying 'wrong' things, or doing 'bad' things — with sex workers, prostitutes and women of 'loose' morals. This lumping together of 'bad' women can also be traced to colonial mechanisms of power.

Scholars have demonstrated amply how the Raj utilised the figure of the prostitute in the exercise of power over Indians (Morcom, 2013; Mitra 2020). What is interesting to note is that colonial mechanics of power utilised the concept of the prostitute across varying conditions, so that any woman acting beyond her allocated space could become a sex worker in theory. This would include:

virtually all women outside of monogamous Hindu upper-caste marriage, including the tawa'if, the courtesan, the dancing girl, the devadasi, high-caste Hindu widows, Hindu and Muslim polygamous women, low-class Muslim women workers, indentured women transported across the British empire, beggars and vagrants, women followers of religious sects, mendicant performers, professional singers, the wives of sailors, women theatre actors, saleswomen, nurses, urban industrial labourers, and domestic servants. (Mitra, 2020, p. 4)

In other words, as Mitra notes, women defying the confines of gendered space, and seeking an independent livelihood (by becoming performers for example), could be brought under the umbrella term 'prostitute', without

necessarily having to sell sex. What was transgressive about the conduct of, say, saleswomen and industrial labourers, was their being *out of place*. Their presence outside domestic space meant their (temporary) disassociation from home and hearth; from their expected (unpaid) nurturing, caring and rearing functions. This points towards a conflation of discursive interests involving Raj authorities and South Asian men who deemed it 'respectable' for their women to remain within the domestic space assigned to them.

Stage-sanctioned Prostitution

We have seen so far that women who step outside the domestic space surrender the security and respectability of the home: 'In most societies', believes Ringdal, 'a man who takes responsibility for his children is considered more moral than one who does not. Understood in this way, the family is a positive servitude, while prostitution is a negative freedom' (Ringdal, 2004). A woman earning for herself, and her wards, becomes a prostitute in this sense. On this account, we argue, modes of (kin)aesthetic performance, including dramatic performance, become conceptual avenues of negative freedom for women:

The female performer is perhaps the most unsettling of figures, precisely in her unsettledness — her seemingly excessive mobility in the public sphere, which disrupted foundational moral distinction between the home and the world. (L. Singh, 2008, p. 317)

While tracing the etymology of three terms employed for 'fallen' women in India — *veshya*, *ganika* and *tawaif* — Chatterjee (2008, p. 280) opines that what these women have fallen from may be their pedestal of domestic respectability, since they left the home to work like men. In this sense, the stage is seen to sanction prostitution. The freedom gained through the performing arts 'degrades' women, regardless of whether they are involved in active sex work or not. Relatedly, the prostitute becomes a yardstick against which domestic respectability is to be measured (Ringdal, 2004).

As women able to work independently become a source of insecurity and instability in gendered society, the presence of professional sex workers in film, theatre and other forms of performing arts must also be noted. The renowned twentieth-century thespian Binodini Dasi (1863-1941) was 'recruited ... at age eleven' from the red-light district of Calcutta (Hansen, 1998, p. 555), and despite gaining fame, perpetuated the link between prostitution and the performing arts. Following the creation of Pakistan in 1947, the few active theatre companies in Lahore and Karachi operated with a bevy of "dancing-girls" suitably unclad and untalented' (Carrapiett, 1955, p. 13). Following the end of the Zia regime (1977 — 1988), Punjabi theatre attracted women performers from the infamous *Heera Mandi* of Lahore (Pamment, 2017, p. 145). The typical Punjabi comic play today is regularly punctuated with dance performances of scantily clad women, freely breaking the fourth wall and calling out to the men in attendance. Most of the humour in these plays is created by male comedians with the 'dancing-girls' having little to do with the plot.

Despite the fact that some women performers have become comics by participating in the ribaldry, at times even emasculating the men in a reversal of sorts, they continue to be seen in reductive terms, and are frequently blamed for

spawning 'vulgarity' in society. It is interesting to note that one such dancer/comic, Nargis (1974 —), has quite often been pilloried by her male colleagues for starting her own business ventures from 'ill-acquired' capital. In diversifying her sources of income, the actress has seemingly literalised the negative freedom that patriarchy associates with independent women. The Punjab government, nonetheless, was in no mood to appreciate the financial acumen of leading ladies of the stage and launched a crackdown on 'vulgarity' in June 2018. A ban was placed on plays with dancing-girls, such as Nargis, who were blamed for uttering 'unethical or profane dialogues' (Lodhi, 2018). Even if they were intended to 'cleanse' local theatre, government bans on lady comics and dancers corroborated the link between theatre and prostitution.

The participation of women in theatre also has an interesting history in South Asia. It was theatre audiences and practitioners themselves who brought women to perform in the presidency towns of the Raj. Initially, at Parsi-owned theatres in Bombay, young boys were employed to play women on stage. The practice continued until the end of the nineteenth-century. But crossdressing boys would usually give themselves away immediately. Even if they were successful otherwise, the incongruity became acute during dances. At this point let us note that even though theatre companies in Bombay, Madras and Calcutta might have been inspired by European theatrical practices, they simultaneously incorporated components of indigenous performance traditions where dance and mime were necessary elements. Since boys were not seen to be capable of capturing the sensual finesse of what were intended to be female performances, the urge for and demand to allocate female roles to women gained traction (Bhatti, 2016, p. 15). Since 'respectable' women would not take up the profession, a door was opened for ladies from the red-light districts (L. Singh, 2008, p. 322).

Theatre and *Tawaif*

Given the circumstances in which women were invited to theatre, preference was given to women who were physically attractive and well-versed in dance (Bhatti, 2016, p. 15). Here, we can assume with a measure of certainty, a growing demand to employ women well-versed in the physical graces (and perhaps singing). This is where the link between the theatre performer and the South Asian courtesan, or *tawaif*, becomes clear. Historically, the *tawaif* were instructors of elite culture to the Mughal aristocracy. Since they had access to powerful men, they were involved in 'male' spheres of activity which the British sought to control after the War of Independence or Great Mutiny of 1857, reducing many *tawaif*-ladies to poverty and sometimes prostitution (Syeda, 2015, p. 17). In the post-1857 era, the courtesan became the *nautch* girl in colonial parlance, whose chief purpose was to provide entertainment, particularly to a white clientele (Singh, 2014, p. 179).

Within the initial decades of the twentieth-century, a channel developed between the courtesan quarters — or red-light districts — and the theatre. Such a situation can be seen to have worked as a deterrent for Muslim women, and men in certain cases, to join theatre companies. What we see is that the *tawaif* who were reduced to prostitution by colonial laws, found vocation in British-inspired theatres in the presidency towns of India. But while the new network channelised the skills of the *tawaif*, the association of prostitution became so notorious that

women of the *ashrafia* (Muslim elite) refrained from even watching performances, let alone participating in theatre.

Syed Imtiaz Ali Taj (1900 — 1970), along with British observer John Campbell, noted the attitude of the (Muslim) aristocracy and the middle-class towards theatre in the presidency towns and important cities like Lahore: 'Women from respectable families rarely came to the spectacles. In galleries [reserved for women], prostitutes would usually seat themselves and look down on the spectators by peeking through the blinds' (Taj, 1966. p. 10). Campbell notes further that he hardly ever saw native women in theatres (Bhatti, 2016, p. 16). The colonial clubbing of the *tawaif* with prostitution had trickled down to different segments in society. In its definitions for *tawaif*, the authoritative Urdu dictionary *Farhang-e-Asfiya*, first published in the concluding decades of the nineteenth-century, included 'dancing woman' and 'prostitute' (Dehlevii, 1974, p. 249), showing that the *tawaif*-whore link had calcified in the public imaginary.

Theatre and Islam

The first instinct is to see theatre and Islam as diametrically opposed to each other. Islam, particularly in its orthodox incarnations, is seen to be opposed to secular creative expression. The Quran itself takes a rather dim view of poets in *Ash-Shu'ara*. The twenty-sixth chapter of the book (verse 224-226) admonishes believers to be wary of bards: 'As for poets, the erring follow them. Hast thou not seen how they stray in every valley, and how they say that which they do not' (Pickthall, 1994, p. 390). Marmaduke Pickthall notes in his annotation to the chapter that the Quran here is distinguishing between poets and prophets; the former are not sincere in their utterances, the latter mean exactly what they are saying (Pickthall, 1994, p. 378). Poets emerge as insincere charlatans to the extent that they are not obliged to follow through on what they propose. Mohammad Aziza points to another important element of drama that upset early Muslims. When the Arabs came into contact with Greek art and culture, the theatre posed a peculiar problem owing to the necessity of conflict between ideas and the celebration of mimesis. This, the early expansionist Abbasid caliphate saw as a destabilising force and hence Islam in its early phase recoiled from theatre (Carlson, 2019).

Of course, in pre-Islamic Arabia, poetry existed and bards occupied important positions in tribal society often in proximity to chiefs and elders. The *qit'a* and *qasida* are known kinds of poetry that existed in this period (Shiloah, 1995, p. 5). But poets and poetry have also served Islam well. The *hamd* is the Islamic equivalent of the Christian or Greek hymn, that is, verses that praise God (Hena, 2012, p. 192). The *naat* is popular across the Muslim world. It is poetry that celebrates the Islamic Prophet (Hena, 2012, p. 191). Relatedly, the *qawwali* is 'an energetic musical performance of Sufi Muslim poetry that aims to lead listeners to a state of religious ecstasy — to a spiritual union with Allah' (Gorlinski, 2009). As in the case of music and dance, theologians have been split over the issue with some permitting only 'Islamic' poetry, and others accommodating secular compositions, lyrics and love poems even (especially in *Sufi* denominations).

Despite differences of opinion within the Islamic world, important theatre historians, as Carlson notes, have assumed a polarity between Islam and the

performing arts; Oscar Brockett's important work, for instance, assures its readers that

In a[ny] history of theatre ... Islam is largely a negative force. It forbade artists to make images of living things because Allah was said to be the only creator of life ... the prohibition extended to the theatre, and consequently in those areas where Islam became dominant, advanced theatrical forms were stifled (Brockett & Hildy, 2014, pp. 68-9).

Carlson has contested this received wisdom by interpreting the tradition of story-telling as part of the repertoire of the performing arts which was already popular in the Middle East, and which Islam put to great use through 'anecdotes, fragments of history, and reported deeds and sayings of the Prophet' (Carlson, 2019, Introduction, para. 10). He traces 'dramatic' renditions of polemical material to the middle of the seventh-century, although such 'performances' were looked down upon by the orthodox clergy. Nonetheless, parts of the Arab world had their own forms of puppet theatre by the thirteenth-century (Carlson, 2019).

Another important contender for consideration is the *ta'ziyeh* which Malekpour (2004) has read as 'Islamic Drama'. The *ta'ziyeh* is ritual mourning for the slaying of the grandson of the Islamic Prophet by the Umayyad regime in Karbala in 680 CE. It usually involves poetry recitation — or *rowzeh khāni* which is sad story-telling and dirge singing (Moosavi, 2016, para. 1) — along with the use of floats and emblems in processions, and sometimes dramatic enactment. Iran, the centre of *Shi'ite* Islam, has, over the years, virtually professionalised the *ta'ziyeh* into a modern theatre, complete with troupes, demarcated space (akin to Western theatre halls), props, music and sound and light effects (Chelkowski, 1977).

On the other hand, despite the existence of forms of creative expression within the Islamic world, theatre, particularly in terms of secular dramatics, has not gained institutional salience comparable to the West. The woes of theatre in Pakistan, we believe, ought not to be traced solely to faith-inspired opposition, but rather to the confluence of Islam and non-religious social hostility, which, to a degree, is common among Muslims and non-Muslims in South Asia. But, as noted above, this social hostility in Pakistan is accentuated and sometimes overlapped by perceived Islamic distaste for the mimetic arts. In this way, the two are mutually imbricated.

In the following section, we take another look at the social opposition to theatre in the country. We contend that the nexus of religious and secular disapproval may be taken as the ideational conjunction of prostitution with theatrical performance; an avenue we took up earlier and now return to.

Homemakers vs. Whores

We have shown earlier in this paper that the performing arts, especially when they involved women, were conflated with prostitution in South Asia. Both performance and prostitution involved women on 'display' for the male gaze, thus vulgarising the enterprise, both from secular and religious perspectives. But Islam adds another dimension to the disapproval. The Quran, in *An-Nur* (24: 31), quite

comprehensively forbids women from displaying their beauty and graces to men they are not related to:

And tell the believing women to lower their gaze and modest, and to display of their adornment only that which is apparent, and to draw their veils over their bosoms, and not to reveal their adornment save to their own husbands or fathers or husbands' fathers, or their sons, or their husbands' sons, or their brothers, or their brothers' sons or sisters' sons, or their women, or their slaves, or male attendants who lack vigour, or children who know naught of women's nakedness. (Pickthall, 1994, p. 363)

Women are ordained to wear dressing that does not reveal the contours of the body. A tradition of the Prophet (Hadith 2128), as recorded in the canonical collection of Muslim, states:

Two are the types of the denizens of Hell whom I did not see: people having flogs like the tails of the ox with them and they would be beating people, and *the women who would be dressed but appear to be naked*, who would be inclined (to evil) and make their husbands incline towards it. Their heads would be like the humps of the bukht camel inclined to one side. They will not enter Paradise and they would not smell its odour whereas its odour would be smelt from such and such distance. ([Italics added] Sahih Muslim, n.d.)

The *ahādith* or sayings of the Prophet supplement the Quran for the majority of Muslims in the world. *Hadith* literature is stressed particularly in the Salafi/ Ahl-e-Hadith and Deobandi schools of Islam in South Asia. Read together, we learn from the Quranic verse and Prophetic tradition above that women who display their beauty to unrelated men, and those who dress revealingly have both strayed from the path Islam has ordained for them. Resultantly, religious distaste for performances that bring women in the public gaze is reticulated with non-religious disapproval of theatre for similar reasons: 'Since the social construction of gender [in South Asia] places "good women" in seclusion, women who appear in public spaces (such as on stage) are defined as "bad", that is prostitutes' (Singh, 2008, p. 317).

The collation of the performer with the prostitute has proved enduring. In the early part of the twentieth-century, most theatres in the Bombay region were owned by Parsi merchants. Even though Muslims were associated with the profession in different capacities, says Nazir Zaigham, theatre was dominated by Hindu writers, technicians and performers (Zaigham, personal communication, Nov. 28, 1986). During this period, Muslim dramatists worked as 'Munshis' or assistant writers (Bhatti, 2016, p. 15). These assistants would have been permanent employees of the theatre company that employed them. However, we can gauge the 'Muslim' contribution to theatre from the fact that the total number of employees would range from 30 to 50, with one or two Muslims. We must note nonetheless, that in this era, it was hard even for non-Muslim women to engage in theatrical activities of this kind. This was so because theatre as an institution with a dedicated performance space and a more-or-less regular group of employees, was a consequence of the British colonial presence in South Asia, and not, in the strict sense, an indigenously-developed institution. And so, even in Parsi-owned

theatre companies, young boys would play girls/ women on stage (as noted earlier).

In Pakistan, *tawaif* is common parlance for prostitute, employed particularly for women in film, theatre and sometimes television. Readily accessible online dictionaries of Urdu repeat and reinforce the association. One popular online resource defines *tawaif* as ‘prostitute’, ‘whore’, ‘courtesan’, ‘dancing-girl’ (Rekhta Dictionary, n.d.), thus establishing a line of inheritance from the nineteenth-century *Farhang-e-Asfiya*.

In the 1960s and 70s, women, even from the literate, Western-educated elite, found it hard to participate in theatre activities in Pakistan’s cultural centres like Lahore and Karachi. Two examples of the attitude towards the performing arts are mentioned here. Samina Ahmed (1946 —), a renowned actor, producer and director, recalls how convincing her parents to let her act was the most difficult stage in her career:

I had just finished one play, but my mother refused to allow me to work on the next. Kamal Ahmad Rizvi Sahib [actor, writer, director 1930 — 2015] came to my mother and recommended that she permit me to work at the theatre. However, my mother flatly refused. Rizvi Sahib met me and said: ‘Am I such a bad person that your mother did not listen to me?’ (S. Ahmed, personal communication, June 7, 2009)

Thespian and TV actor Naeem Tahir (1937 —) recalls:

I dragged Salima Faiz [daughter of poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz 1911 — 1984] to the theatre. I had to beg her parents while registering my deference to them. I remember saying to Mr. and Mrs. Faiz Ahmed Faiz ‘If your daughters will not work in drama, then who will’ (Tahir, personal communication, Sept. 21, 1986).

In a similar vein, one of the authors of this writing, Salman Bhatti, has taught drama at four educational institutions in Lahore, and has found that the hardest part in staging a play at Pakistani universities is finding girls to act. Parents, who often let their sons work, are reluctant to allow girls to perform. Paradoxically, they are not so averse to their daughters acting if they are performing in English-language plays (a point we mean to take up in a separate study).

Conclusion

In the past seventy years, film and theatre productions in Pakistan have declined. Like most complicated social developments, there are multifarious causes for this steady descent, which call for sustained transdisciplinary investigations. Of primary significance to our study is the bracketing of women on ‘display’ — either in the workplace, on the streets, or on stage — with sex workers, prostitutes and women of ‘loose’ morals. This lumping together of ‘bad’ women can be traced to colonial mechanisms of power, which, in confluence with South Asian middle-class norms of respectability, sought to demarcate the place/ space

of women in society. The *tawaif*, in particular, suffered due to British legislation for their perceived mobility and participation in politics. Subsequently, the *tawaif*, and by extension, any woman on 'display', became a whore, prostitute, or sex worker, and the theatre, which not only displayed women but also provided them with a means of income, became, and continues to be, an unwanted cultural product in Pakistan.

In this study, which is part of a larger on-going project on theatre in Pakistan, we have argued that attitudes towards theatre can be linked to its perceived transgression of notions of respectability, which, in turn, are imbricated with religious dictates that situate women beyond the male/ public gaze. There is a confluence of the two legacies — secular and faith-inspired — which are hostile to women on 'display'. These trends, as we have tried to show, are conterminous in their denunciation of different forms of (secular) creative expression. In subsequent studies, we aim to expand on and pursue further the strands we have identified here, in conjunction with other mechanisms of control that retard the growth of artistic activity in Pakistan.

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