

by Rumana Husain

# Awareness and Dissent- performance in the by-lanes

"I think we should reinforce some barriers instead of collapsing them. Build new walls against racism, which is one of the horrible things that exist in the world. A wall against intolerance - which is a form of racism, not accepting the existence of the other one. The wall against sexism which enslaves half of humanity - women. A wall against globalization, which makes all of us become clones of ourselves. So build barriers, build walls and fight against intolerance, against racism, sexism and globalization, fight vigorously, and re-unite people."

- Brazilian theatre director Augusto Boal

As I set to work on this article, I realized that my first memories of street theatre go back to *Raas Leela* enacted on the occasion of *Janmashtami*, the birth of Lord Krishna, by ordinary people, rather than trained, professional actors. As a child I had witnessed these in my father's town in Madhya Pradesh, India, where we visited my grandmother almost every year. The loud make-up, deafening drums, call of the conch shells followed with the tinkling of temple bells, people prostrating in veneration in front of the couple assuming the roles of Lord Krishna and his consort Radha, devotional sentiments - actors and audience both overwhelmed with emotion, were reminiscent of the tenth of Moharram *tazia* processions back home in Karachi, Pakistan. The *Raas Leela* pantomime on the streets brought home, at an early age, the realization of an art form that combined an array of various other art mediums.

Traditionally, theatre in the Indian subcontinent, has its roots in folk tales. Nautanki was a popular form of theatre that traveled from one place to another, and was interspersed with song and dance. In Pakistan though, 'drama' or 'theatre' has been confined to halls and auditoriums, and the 'street theatre' genre has not really been practiced in its pure form - spontaneous, *on the street* performances, as started by bands

of roving artists during military rules in Latin America. Street theatre originated there for a purpose: political agitation, and the need to get across strong messages without getting caught by the authorities. Nevertheless, let us try to explore the origins of theatre in the pre-partition/pre-independence era in India, and the more contemporary genre of street theatre or parallel theatre as practiced in Pakistan.

It is pertinent to recall that due to a complex network of socio-political changes, such as the October Revolution of Russia in 1917, a new significance was brought to theatre all over the world. In the Indian subcontinent, the National Movement against British Imperialism was gaining momentum. Meanwhile, an actor-director at Moscow Art Theatre, Konstantin Stanislavsky, had revolutionized not only Russian theatre but also the theatre of the world. Founder of "Method Acting," Stanislavsky was born in 1868. He directed Chekhov's most important plays. Before him, no one had devised a method of achieving believability. This gave rise to a new crop of playwrights, including Gorky and Tolstoy, who influenced both Indian writing and Indian thought. The Communist Party of India was formed, and in 1936, writers and intellectuals such as Sajjad Zaheer and Munshi Prem Chand got together at Lucknow and organized

the Progressive Writers Association (later, the Progressive Writers' Movement and the Lahore Art Circle were the break-away factions on this side of the border).

The Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) was formed soon after, which involved top-ranking musicians, dancers, writers and artists. Uday Shankar led the choreography.

IPTA, from its inception, had gathered some of the best Urdu writers, all writing plays. There was Ismat Chughtai, Khwaja Ahmed Abbas, Krishen Chander, Ali Sardar Jafri and Rajinder Singh Bedi, amongst others. Uzra Bhatt was at the time the leading actress of Prithvi Theatre that ran to full houses at the Opera House, Bombay. Another leading actress of Prithvi Theatre was her older sister Zohra Sehgal, who is a film actress of international repute, and who also acted for IPTA occasionally. Later, the famed Urdu poet Kaifi Azmi's wife Shaukat and their gifted daughter Shabana, also worked for IPTA.

A very significant aspect of theatre in the subcontinent was the Parsi Theatre. Popular love stories such as *Shirin Farhad* and *Laila Majnoon* were performed regularly. A whole batch of young Muslim playwrights cropped up around Parsi Theatre companies and many others were also doing successful plays, which were often based on the two epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. But the most successful playwright of Parsi Theatre was Agha Hashar Kashmiri, who owned a theatre company called the Shakespeare Theatrical Company. He wrote *Rustom-o-Sohrab*, *Aankh Ka Nasha*, *Masbriqui Hoor* and romances such as *Yebudi Ki Larki*.

Soon after Partition, theatre continued in Pakistan with the efforts of stalwarts like Rafi Peer, Khwaja Moinuddin, Imtiaz Ali Taj and others. Back in the early sixties, in the biggest city of Pakistan, Katrak and Theosophical Halls were popular venues for theatre. At times, the Metropole and Beach Luxury Hotels also put up performances. Later, the Arts Councils, in Lahore and then in Karachi, became popular locations for a whole range of performances: from Russian circus to Chinese acrobats to local plays



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Image: Atif Badar

was Ali Ahmed, who formed *Natak* (National Academy of Theatre) performing for the middle class at venues such as the Adamjee Auditorium and also for the working classes in factories and public grounds. Khwaja Moinuddin wrote witty satires and biting humour around the themes of migration and disparity between the rich and the poor. Later, Zia Mohyeddin, Aslam Azhar, Mansoor Saeed and Shoaib Hashmi came into prominence and continued to work in the late seventies.

This article will be incomplete without the mention of the man across the border that completed the IPTA cycle - Safdar Hashmi. Uncle of Sania Saeed - one of the most talented theatre and television actors of Pakistan, Hashmi's career was nipped in the bud at the age of 34. He was brutally murdered in 1989, in broad daylight during the performance of one of his plays, *Halla Bol*, on the outskirts of

for a national daily. He made street theatre an important tool of mass communication and expression of political ideology. A day after his funeral, his wife went to Sahibabad with the troupe and completed the play. The Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust is now carrying on his legacy.

Hashmi was involved in building ties with progressive groups in Pakistan. In 1987 and 1988, he and Badal Sircar, a prominent playwright and director from India (whose group is called *Satabdi*), held a series of workshops for Pakistani political theatre groups in Karachi and Lahore.

Safdar Hashmi wrote the popular *Tebrik-e-Niswan* (Women's Movement) play, *Aurat* (Woman) whereas Badal Sircar's *Juloos*



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Delhi. People had poured in to see the thought provoking play, which was about factory workers in Sahibabad who were on strike to protest against their employers and the government. In the crowd were henchmen of the ruling elite, who were targeted in the play.

Hashmi had carried on the Peoples Theatre work for *Jan Natya Manch* (JANAM), an organization he had founded. He was an activist, playwright, actor, poet, singer, teacher, member of the Communist Party of India-Marxist, and a columnist

(Procession) was *Ajoka Theatre's* first performance.

*Tebrik-e-Niswan's* Sheema Kermani, a dancer and activist, has been performing and teaching *Bharatanatyam* and *Odissi* dances in Karachi since the early 1980s. She has extended the classical dance genre into theatre productions under the banner of the *Tebrik*, which was established in 1980. Its performances, including street theatre, are filled with music and dance.

Despite facing a number of hurdles from the martial law regime of the eighties, Sheema continued as an actor, dancer and teacher. Referring to classical dances and theatre, she says, "Unless these arts are institutionalized, they cannot continue. They will perish with the few individuals who practice them. Personally, as far as I am concerned, I will continue performing and teaching, no matter what the odds."

Sheema further explains that the British colonizers had promulgated the No Objection Certificate (NOC) laws according to an Act in 1857 - the landmark year for the struggle for independence - to suppress the people of the Indian subcontinent. Unfortunately, the same laws are being followed to date.

"We perform in a park or a *mairaan* (an open ground), or in a school, but not on the streets as such," says Sheema. In the Orangi squatter settlement in Karachi - the largest in Pakistan, with approximately one million inhabitants, the *Tebrik* group has performed in various locations. Sheema declares, "I always have this fear that in a volatile society such as ours, anything that we perform could trigger off an aggressive response from the audience."

She cites a couple of instances when she and her group had felt threatened, "In the early years of our performances; in 1984, to be precise, the Girls Action Forum was formed at

Again, despite the ubiquitous presence of those men, the actors continued with the play and ended it as per program. The men sat through it and then left peacefully. So perhaps the fears are unfounded and people are more receptive and tolerant (at least regarding some issues) than they are made out to be?

The *Tebrik's* play, *Ab Jang Nabi Ho Gi* (There will be no war now), based on Aristophane's Greek classic, *Lysistrata*, written in 411 BC, is adapted and translated by well-known poet and writer Fehmida Riaz and is directed by Sheema. The play has been criticized for its bold theme. Sexual innuendos and sensuality are not easy subjects to be digested by the Pakistani society, often adopting double standards when it comes to issues of morality.

*Tebrik-e-Niswan* has staged *Meri Zindagi Ka Safar* (My Life's Journey) in a ward at Qatar General Hospital in Karachi. Doctors, midwives, staff nurses and patients sat in the corridors watching the play with its strong feminist message. Based on a true story by feminist poet Attiya Dawood, the play is "extremely effective, as it touches people emotionally. With such active provocation of thinking and debate, transformation of some inane ideas is bound to take place," says Sheema about this play in particular, and the other *Tebrik* plays in general. So far, the *Tebrik* has a repertoire of ten

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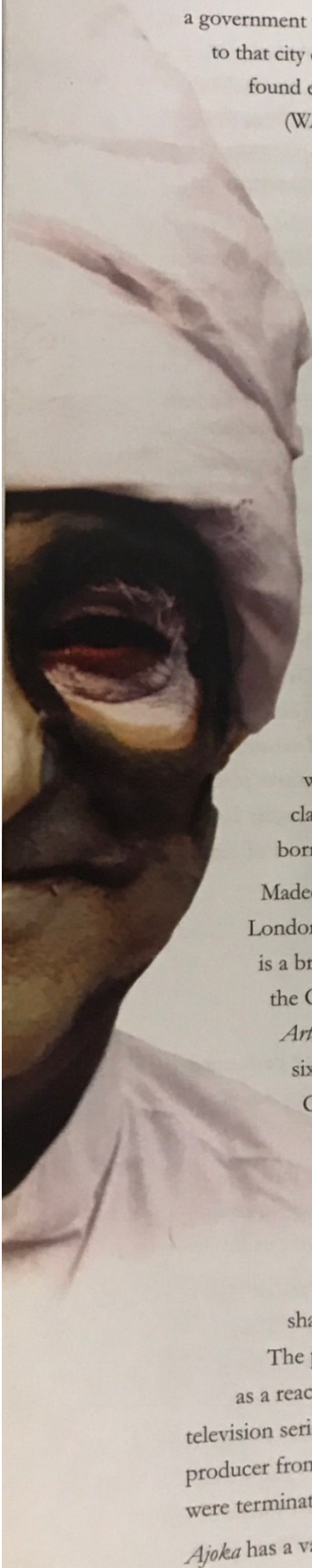
the Karachi University. I was directing a play in which Samina Peerzada was acting. We received numerous warnings from young men belonging to a certain political party. These warnings were sent to us on bits of paper. We were scared, but we continued...and nothing happened!"

"Similarly, in 1999," Sheema continues, "we were putting up a performance in a school in Orangi. It was a predominantly Pathan area where dead bodies of men were coming in from the borders. The entire atmosphere was charged. Hundreds of defiant-looking men were sitting on all three sides of the 'stage'. We were to perform *Aurat*. The play urges, and in turn energizes and motivates women to take control of their lives. We feared an assault from the orthodox Pathan community..."

mobile theatre productions. These plays have been performed in other cities and small towns, as well as in a few South Asian countries.

If *Tebrik's* stronghold is Karachi, *Ajoka Theatre* thrives in Lahore and its surrounds. Madeeha Gauhar, together with some other colleagues, founded *Ajoka* in 1983.

Its first play, *Juloos*, could not be performed at any of the public halls or auditoriums available in Lahore, as a 'no objection certificate' was required from the government, which scrutinized every script thoroughly. The play was therefore enacted on the lawns of Madeeha's parents' house. The agencies caught up with it and harassed the performers as well as the audience, but this came about after the show had been on for a few evenings. Madeeha started to teach at



a government women's college in Gujranwala, commuting to that city on a daily basis. Soon afterwards, her activism found expression with the Women's Action Forum (WAF). Those were the days, during General Zia ul Haq's military rule, when MRD - the Movement for Restoration of Democracy - had been launched and was gaining momentum.

"More than twenty thousand people had been arrested. No channels or outlets for expression of outrage against the 'amended' laws or the dictatorial rule of the General were available. WAF had been organizing protests and rallies in the streets against the law of evidence. I, along with my sister Faryal Gauhar, human rights activists and lawyers - sisters Asma Jahangir and Hina Jilani, and Rubina Saigol, were all baton-charged for participating in those rallies," Madeeha recalls. She was arrested and twice jailed at Kot Lakhpat, where although the barracks were quite spacious, she says a mental claustrophobia enveloped her. *Ajoka Theatre* was born in this environment.

Madeeha earned her second Master's in Drama from London University. Her husband, Shahid Nadeem, is a brilliant playwright. His Punjabi adaptation of the German writer Brecht's *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* has become *Bala King*. Written almost sixty years ago, *Arturo Ui* was as relevant to Germany and Europe of the 1940s, as *Bala King* is to Pakistan today. It is a story of a small-time gangster's rise to become a self-acclaimed 'protector' of innocent citizens. In return for his 'protection', they had to either pay heavy monthly premiums, or suffer heavily in the shape of violence carried out by his muscle men.

The play was first performed in March 1998, and as a reaction to this bold play, as well as to his earlier television serial, *Zard Dopeber*, Shahid Nadeem's services as producer from the state-owned television channel, the PTV, were terminated.

*Ajoka* has a vast repertoire of stage performances, and its

street plays include *Gardan Ki Talaash*, *Sharm Di Gul* and *Dbee Rani*. It has had long-standing relations with theatre groups in India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and the Philippines, while additionally; it has participated in theatre festivals and conferences in Thailand, Hong Kong, Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Australia and the UK.

*Ajoka* recently toured India to stage its famous play *Bullab*. It tells the life story of Baba Bulleh Shah, the Punjabi Sufi poet revered equally by the Indians and Pakistanis for his message of love, peace and justice. *Ajoka* is Pakistan's first theatre group to perform in the Indian Punjab. According to Madeeha, allowing the theatre company to cross the border on foot was a positive sign from both the countries.

Shahid Nadeem's Punjabi play *Lapar* has been included in the post-graduate Punjabi course at the Patiala University in India, and his two books of plays *Kahsman nu Kahanian* and *Teesri Dastak* were translated in Gurmukhi language.

Under the ACT banner (Ajoka Children's Theatre), *Ajoka* has performed *Bund Gali Kay Bacchay*, *Kaali Ghata* and *Bhola*. Children who are admitted as cancer patients at the Shaukat Khanum Cancer Hospital in Lahore, performed the latter play inside the hospital itself. Written by Shahid Nadeem, *Bhola* is a funny, spirited play that helps the children to combat their unfortunate illness with a smiling face.

Madeeha Gauhar has been awarded the *Tamgha-i-Imtiaz* by President Musharraf's government.

Samiya Mumtaz, one of *Ajoka's* star performers, says she has been totally enamored by the way dance and music are entwined with play-acting, as well as the issues of social justice assiduously projected in their plays. "Theatre is a great addiction. When I began working with *Ajoka*, I also learnt to speak Punjabi and Seraiki. Although I have always lived in Lahore, these languages did not come naturally to me. Now I do entire plays in Punjabi and Seraiki. It is just wonderful how some great relationships that cut across class have been formed within the *Ajoka* community," she says. While the *Tebrik-e-Niswan* activities are urban-based, *Action Aid* works mainly in the rural areas. With its slogan "Cultural Action for Change" it professes to look at the causes of poverty, focusing on attitudinal change, social mobilization and reflection on issues.

Actor and director Khalid Ahmad, who was an active associate of the *Tebrik* right from its inception, has now been carried

out theatre activities through Action Aid Pakistan, which is one of UK's largest development charities, working in Pakistan since 1992. Using Brazilian theatre director Augusto Boal's interactive theatre as a medium for the process of social change, the Action Aid team trains a group of villagers during which they decide to take on certain issues in a participatory manner. Local partner organizations prepare the groundwork and a cluster of villages is targeted, in order to engage in issues of honor killings, violence against women, early

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Photography: Fahim Siddiqi, courtesy Images, Dawn

marriages and barriers to women's public participation.

It may be recalled that Boal developed the Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) during the 1950s and 1960s in an effort to transform theatre from the "monologue" of traditional performance into a "dialogue" between the audience and the stage.

"This has been a successful cultural intervention with encouraging results. The strength of this theatre to me is that it is definitely of the people, for the people, and by

the people," says Khalid. "However, there has been a problem to either engage in theatre activities or to increase their frequency in some rural areas," he adds.

For a brief period, Musaddiq Sanwal, a man of many talents, also worked actively with Khalid Ahmad. Besides being a theatre director, Sanwal is an artist of the fine arts/ graphic design genre, as well as a singer. Sanwal, Mohammed Hanif, Rashid Farooqi and Ali Hasnain founded the *Baang Theatre Workshop* in 1990. Unfortunately, the group has now dispersed, but Sanwal's contribution to theatre, using the improvisation technique must be acknowledged, which he learnt from his experience with South-East Asian Cultural Caravan (SEACC). Sanwal was chosen to represent Pakistan for his combined skills as a music/singing/theatre/fine-arts artist. The group worked together for three months, and prepared a play, in no less than seventeen different languages.

Sanwal returned to Lahore after his yearlong stint, and was soon directing his first play called *Raat*. "I applied an interesting technique of improvisations in order to evolve a script. I had learnt this at the SEACC. The idea was to begin with only the outline of a story. Since we spoke different languages, it helped us to speak from the heart, rather than to memorize predetermined lines. I could claim that it was the first time such an experiment was carried out in Pakistan. Eventually, several theatre groups here adopted the improvisation technique." Sanwal then continued with his theatre activities

effort on the part of the state and society," reported Razeshta Sethna a few years ago in an interview with Khalid Ahmad. Popular television actor, Rahat Kazmi started his *Theatrewalas* that struggled for some years before dying out, using venues such as the Taj Mahal Hotel auditorium and the Hashoo auditorium. In Karachi, Sania Saeed and her husband Shahid Shafaat have been involved with theatre and street theatre through *Dastak*, whereas in Lahore, *Lok Rehas* and *Sanjib* also took to the stage with performances that attempted to awaken the masses with their liberal approach towards freedom and humanism.

If Ali Ahmed is to be credited for the first children's theatre in Lahore way back in the early 50s, perhaps the Gripps Theatre could be acknowledged as the first children's theatre in Karachi, which, since the 80s, put up plays regularly for almost two decades. This sustained activity, therefore, placed the Gripps Theatre in the unique position of being the only children's theatre in the country. The Goethe Institut presented these witty, entertaining plays, written by Imran Aslam and directed by the talented Yasmeen Ismail, whose untimely death put an end to the children's theatre...albeit temporarily.

In order to promote a more just and humane society in the country through socially meaningful theatre, a few theatre activists have taken it to the masses and to smaller towns and villages. Theirs has been a story of resilience and personal

### If not...let there be more power to street power!

in Karachi, including working with *Tebrik-e-Niswan* and Action Aid.

Theatre activities in Pakistan have depended largely on certain personalities, as there has been no proper institutionalization of this art form. Besides, the hot and cold air breathed towards it by the ruling government of the time has not helped matters either.

"It may bring an onslaught if it is a repressive regime or it will liberalize and show a degree of commitment towards the promotion of such activities. Third World countries such as Bangladesh, India and Sri Lanka have managed to retain their theatre traditions in the past fifty years, whereas the same has not happened in Pakistan. What unfolded here is another story steeped in dismay and the lack of concerted

sacrifices. But despite these few efforts, for a population of 140 million people, the theatre scene on the whole has remained dismal. In a big city like Karachi, one cannot find even one theatre activity on a daily basis. What are the reasons for this, one might ask.

According to Asma Mundrawala, a part time actor working with *Tebrik-e-Niswan*, the theatre scene lacks serious commitment, as there are only a few individuals who are involved with theatre on a full-time basis. For most others it is not a bread and butter issue. If theatre is to be put on the map in Pakistan - just as other vocations are learnt and practiced - if the art and craft of theatre too is learnt at college by investing four to six years, at the end of which actors, directors are produced; the outcome would be

conceivably different.

On this account a recent development in Karachi is encouraging, as at last an institution for the performing arts is in the making. With Zia Mohyeddin at its helm - as Chairman of the National Academy of Performing Arts (NAPA) - it promises to be all set to improve the current situation. Mohyeddin agrees that a venture such as NAPA can only happen when there is a body of professionals who are dedicated and committed to make it happen. "We want to remove this sense of guilt that the performers here have. They should look the other person in the eye and be able to say, "Yes, I am a singer/I am an actor/I am a dancer. You cannot perform unless you have professional training coupled with professional pride."

A quarter of a century ago, Madeeha Gauhar obtained a Master's degree in Drama from the London University, and presently, Asma Mundrawala is perhaps the only woman in Pakistan who has acquired an MA in Contemporary Art and Performance Theory with a dissertation on Developmental Theatre, from the Wimbledon School of Art, UK.

Asma talks with conviction about the role played by her theatre company in fulfilling the agendas of the various community-based organizations (CBOs) in semi-urban areas with which it liaises. "Creating a play around an issue for a particular community, and later discussing that issue with the audience is, in my opinion, a gratifying interaction with the common people. Their responses are real and in tune with their real experiences," she says.

But all said and done, there has been criticism of some of the well-known theatre practitioners of the country on two accounts. While some people believe that a certain formula has crept into the performances (particularly those meant for the masses) and that the conceptual as well as visual aesthetics is far from innovative or exciting, some others disapprove of these personalities getting involved in practices done solely for materialistic gains. On the one hand, the artists defy the establishment in their texts and on stage, while on the other, in their real life, they submit themselves to the corporate, worldly and opportunistic mode of life in every form.

In 1948, Bertolt Brecht criticized the mode of drama which sought to transform human beings into "a cowed, credulous,

hypnotized mass" who become not only incapable of social thought and action, but who also believed that life takes place on the proscenium stage and that their own existence is unimportant. Brecht said, "How much longer are our souls, leaving our 'mere' bodies under cover of the darkness, to plunge into those dreamlike figures up on the stage, there to take part in the crescendos and climaxes which 'normal' life denies us?"

One might ask if in Pakistan enough lessons of peaceful coexistence and solidarity, the value of dissent in a democratic system, appreciation and tolerance of diverse faiths - as the foundations of a civil society - been learnt through various mediums of art, be it theatre, street theatre, mobile theatre, interactive theatre...

If not...let there be more power to street power!

### Notes

*This article is based on interviews, over the years, with the following:*

*Sbeema Kermani*

*Madeeha Gaubar*

*Khalid Ahmad*

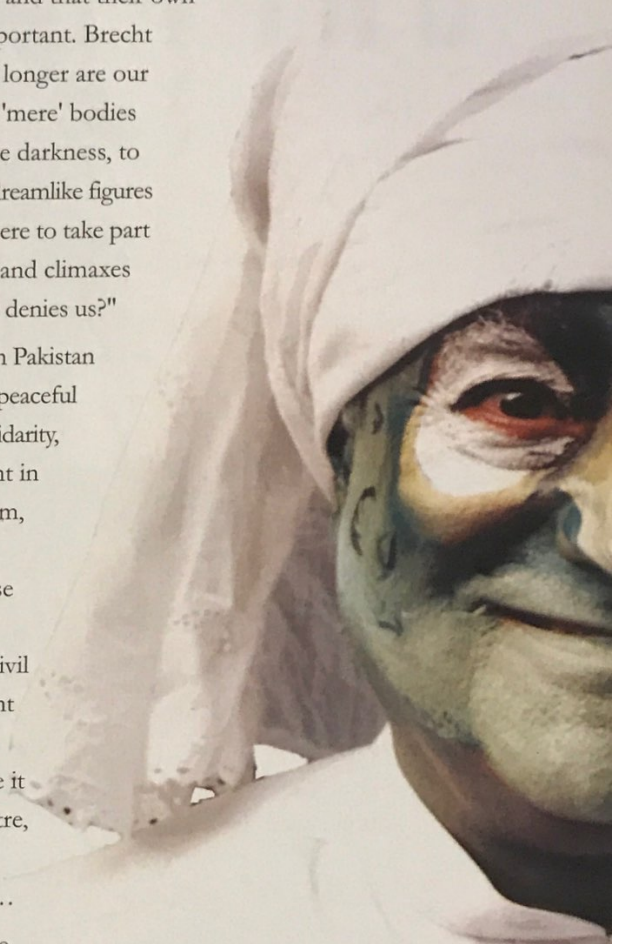
*Sania Saeed*

*Zia Mohyeddin*

*Musaddiq Sanwal*

*Samiya Mumtaz*

*Asma Mundrawala*



Courtesy Images, Dawn