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A critical stage: the role of secular alternative theatre in Pakistan

Fawzia Afzal Khan; Seagull Books, Calcutta, 2005, ISBN 81-7046-2754 (Hbk)

Fawzia Afzal Khan sets out to map the development of alternative theatre, an aspect of creative articulation that has so far been ignored by those aiming to study the social and cultural history of Pakistan.

Theatre, Khan points out, like other forms of artistic expression, suffered from the dictatorial and conservative interpretations of Islam under General Zia ul Haq's regime. A number of creative avenues were actively suppressed for over a decade during the 1980s by the government and the military and religious parties' coalition. A number of theatre groups, which in any case had a fledgling audience, were forced to close down. The primary reason given by the government for these draconian censorship policies was that theatre and other visual forms of representation promoted western and thus anti-Islamic values. The real motivation, however, as it was widely believed, had more to do with impeding platforms for creative opposition to the policies of the government. This period was particularly difficult for minorities, women and other marginalized sections of society as they bore the brunt of coercive Islamico-social and political policies of the government.

It is against this particularly repressive regime that two major theatre organizations/groups came into existence. Khan worked extensively with one of them, *Ajoka*. This book charts out the social and professional history of this particular creative endeavour. The artistic energies behind *Ajoka* are of individuals who would classify themselves as comfortable members of the upper middle class elites. The focus of their plays has increasingly been on portraying the social and economic ills of the marginalized sections of the society, mostly on women who are exploited by various forms of patriarchal structures, be they in the form of men posing as religious upholders of morality or as the protectors of the general public in the form of police officers. *Ajoka* has maintained itself as a theatre with a social purpose rooted in the ideological struggles of the masses. Their plays carry a political message, always critical of the structures of state power, always siding with the weak. Khan's work is important not just for documenting the role of Pakistani theatre and its connections to politics, but also for providing examples of the uses of popular culture to politicize people and bring about social change.

While this book is important, there are also certain issues that remain unaddressed. Greater attention to the politics of running *Ajoka* theatre group would have produced a more nuanced analysis. For example, the following questions might have been useful: What is the relationship between theatre as a transgressive cultural text and its performance in a State-supervised and subsidized theatre complex? What is the relationship of politicized theatre with foreign funding? What are the international politics of funding politicized culture? What might be the local manifestation of such politics in Pakistan? What are the gender politics of organizing and managing politicized theatre in Pakistan? How might one produce an intricate questioning of the appropriation of women's stories as a space that is not just contested along gender lines, but increasingly along economic positionality? Such an analysis would have delved into the complexities involved not just of the represented, but more importantly, those involved with the power of representing this particular aspect of Pakistani national culture.

Khan appears to have too close a personal relation with the management of *Ajoka*; might this relationship have had any impact on the knowledge that she has produced about this particular theatre group as a political practice? In its current form, this book reads more like a facile description of political theatre in Pakistan. It is an effort that undertakes to answer some questions but also leaves other fundamental aspects unexplored.

Khan does talk about a few other theatre groups, which have started to attract audiences back to their performances. However, the very definition of 'Theatre' that is employed and as Khan herself acknowledges is one that excludes a number of theatre groups, which are considered to be crass, bawdy and thus shunned by the middle class because, according to the educated class, they lack political and social orientation. However, the irony of the situation reveals itself in the fact that these 'popular' theatrical productions are able to raise enough capital without foreign donations to compete in the same Alhamra theatre complex. As a result, one may feel that Khan's analysis is tilted more towards political theatre that addresses the middle class of Pakistan, the problematics of which are not fully addressed. What might be construed as problematic is if she aims to represent all politicized theatre in Pakistan – after all, other theatre groups also espouse a political message that might be at odds with the position taken by *Ajoka*.

Despite certain shortcomings, including proofreading errors, this is definitely a welcome effort that was long overdue. It successfully provides a fairly detailed account of one of the major theatre groups of Pakistan. It is a work that adds to the rather limited scholarship in the field of humanities in Pakistan. This is a book that will encourage and inform others interested in pursuing the theory or

the practice of this unique and creative mode of expression that continues on its comeback trail in Pakistan.

Furrukh Khan

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Social choreography: ideology as performance in dance and everyday movement

Andrew Hewitt; Duke UP, Durham and London, 2005, ISBN082233502X £54.00 (Hbk)

Social Choreography, despite the dancers on its cover, is not about the disposition of performing bodies in space, or about the stamp of individual creativity on movement. The term 'choreography' has a broader scope in Andrew Hewitt's contribution to the series (titled *Post-Contemporary Interventions*) edited by Stanley Fish and Fredric Jameson. Dance, Hewitt argues, merely heightens the conventionalization of the body's movements, which suggests the possibility that *all* the body's ways of relating to other bodies and to meaning are to be placed along a continuum of gestures more or less aestheticized or constructed. The theorist of social choreography then (choreography is also defined as an approach to *reading* movement), undertakes to map the rimlands – the shifting zone of articulation – between discourse and bodily practice, ideology and performance. Hewitt himself invokes not only Isadora Duncan, Ted Shawn and Nijinsky, but also Ruskin, Balzac, Bergson and Delsarte, to reflect on the ways in which both dance and the quotidian choreography of the walk, of social gesture, and of posture have sought – and have repeatedly failed – to render the bourgeois body legible.

At the historical moments Hewitt selects for particular attention, dance emerges as an embodied forecast of, or model for, social relations. These moments are loosely bound together by a process of modernization, by a telos of technological rationalization and by the cultural contradictions unleashed by capitalist relations. In Chapter 1, for instance, Hewitt tracks the relationship between dance and philosophical approaches to the idea of labour. While Schiller saw the English ballroom as representing the ideal alignment of individual freedom (*play*) and social harmony, Ruskin and Morris (whose discourse on art, work and play is summed up by the phrase 'aesthetic socialism') assimilated dance to the sphere of *work*: an idea that, given 19th century vitalist faith in an originary 'social energy,' had its dangers. The