The Aesthetics and Politics of Postcolonial/ Feminist Prison Theatre: Ajoka 's *The Acquittal/Barri*

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ABSTRACT: *Ajoka Theatre's* Barri/The Acquittal *underscores one major trend in post-colonial writing, that is, the prison theater, which in Gary Boire's view, revolves "parodically around such mechanisms of authority as trial and judgment, discipline and imprisonment." This paper examines the features employed by Shahid Nadeem in* Barri *that also characterize the postcolonial prison theatre which are: Foucault's illustration of the basic methodology of the body as text, the reversal of the fool's festival, the scapegoat ritual, a mocking mime, folk humor which mimics official ceremonies, etc." It also appropriately fits into the category of the carnivalesque described by Bakhtin, a form which directly disrupts all forms of official authority and systems of hegemony and totalitarian control, which is another aspect of postcolonial prison theatre.* The Acquittal/ Barri *graphically paints the abject conditions of Pakistani prisons and their inmates. Nadeem unveils the inhuman and derogatory treatment inflicted on women in prisons, exposing simultaneously the circumstances and forces that are involved in bringing them to this deplorable state. The play also focuses on the patterns of torture designed specifically for female prisoners, and the way female prisoners interact with each other, and their gradually developing collective feminine consciousness. Simultaneously, the very coercive system also reveals the gaps and fissures that allow for expressions of freedom and transgression. Barri dissects and carves out the body of ideology that helps shape systems of control, exhibiting dramaturgies of freedom or rebellion against authority. The paper explores how the play weaves out patterns of feminist theatre and the postcolonial prison theatre that are affiliated in nature and aesthetics.*

Key words: resistance, power, control, carnivalesque, hegemony.

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In his groundbreaking study of prisons and the history of punishment, Foucault illustrates the parade of the chain-gangs in the nineteenth century, and the way those convicts flaunted the symbols of their incarceration and punishment as ornaments, intended to make their suffering seem trivial and display their defiance while making a mockery of their punishment in front of the public.

> In every town it passed through, the chain-gang brought its festival with it; it was a saturnalia of punishment, a penalty turned into privilege… it aroused in the convicts not so much the compulsory marks of repentance as the explosion of a mad joy that denied that punishment. To the ornaments of the collar and chain, the convicts themselves added ribbons, braided straw, flowers or precious stuffs. The chain was the round and the dance, throughout the evening that followed the riveting, the chain-gang formed a great merry-go-round, which went round and round the courtyard… .(*Discipline and Punish* 260-61)

Gary Boire in his article on prison theater writes about this spectacle that Foucault describes: "worst of all, the spectacle rapidly threatened to explode into carnivalesque subversion: this public spectacle triggered a response opposite to that intended" (21).

Boire in his remarkable study on postcolonial prison theater enumerates significant features that are frequently employed in plays that revolve around "such mechanisms of authority as trial and judgment, discipline and imprisonment" (22). In his study on prison theater, Boire notes that even a rudimentary survey of the literatures of Australia, Canada, and New Zealand would demonstrate this tendency to engage with this "legal trope" (22). Ajoka's *Barri/The Acquittal* underscores one major trend in post-colonial writing, that is, the prison theater, which in Boire's view, revolve "parodically around such mechanisms of authority as trial and judgment, discipline and imprisonment" (22). What Boire observes about prison theater from Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, is also applicable to *Barri*, as the play also aims to bring to light what is officially and deliberately concealed.

In order to examine how power relations operate, Giddens' observations are relevant in this context: "All social systems are viewed as 'power systems', and usually this means that they are involved in the institutional mediation of power" (*The Nation State* 9).The State Power functions with the aid of the State Apparatuses, whether they are

exercised overtly by the use of force which is a prevalent custom in South Asia or employed in "attenuated and concealed and even symbolic" forms (Althusser 145). When it comes to symbolic forms of the state apparatuses, it would be relevant at this point to discuss Pierre Bourdieu's notion of power and the way it functions. Lois Mcnay, discussing Bourdieu's concept of habitus argues that bodily identity is not natural but involves the inscription of social norms or the 'cultural arbitrary' upon the body (36). However, Bourdieu's concept of habitus is not limited to bodily identity alone; it also signifies the 'living through' of these norms or imposition of the ideology by the individual in his/her everyday life. Mcnay explains the concept of habitus further by emphasizing that Bourdieu also like Foucault postulates that social inequalities are not instilled at the level of direct governmental or organizational intervention, but through the "subtle inculcation of power relations upon the bodies and dispositions of individuals. This process of corporeal inculcation is an instance of what Bourdieu calls *symbolic violence* or a form of domination which is 'exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity' (qtd in Mcnay 36).

Bourdieu's theory leads to one significant factor which impacts the condition of women substantially and that is the "symbiotic relationship between the state and patriarchy". Traditionally, almost all societies in South Asia are patriarchal, authority rests with male members of the family while the state, by having the power to legislate and implement laws, including religious/ Shariah laws, transfers the power to all male members of society. Indeed, clergy, police and the criminal justice system in Pakistan can exert "direct control over women's dress and deportment" (Kandiyoti 14). Thus, power is exercised by male members of society, not only within the domestic sphere but also in the whole community. The state plays a pivotal role in formulating laws that are usually detrimental to the concerns of women belonging to the lower classes in particular. Furthermore, as Kandiyoti observes: "Contemporary policies and ideologies relating to women are being formulated in an increasingly complex field of forces where governments respond to the contradictory pressures of different sections of their internal constituencies as well as to their international ties of economic and political dependence" (14).

In all provinces of Pakistan, especially in the rural areas of interior Sindh and Southern Punjab, women are dependent on male members of their family, having no control over their lives. At least 75 per cent of women populate rural areas, where living conditions are

deplorable due to low income levels; the majority of them are unlettered, having no knowledge of Islam or their rights as Muslim women or as Pakistani citizens. In a report by the government-sponsored commission on the status of women: "the average rural woman of Pakistan is born in near slavery, leads a life of drudgery and dies invariably in oblivion" (Kandiyoti 77). However, it would be erroneous to assume that all Pakistani women are subservient to men and live in abject conditions. Pakistani women cannot be yoked together as one homogenous group, as society is class-based and women hailing from different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds face issues that are incomparable in many ways. The influence of feudal lords and customs, for instance, in the interior Sindh and the Southern belt of the Punjab are different, compelling women to comply with inflexible and sometimes inhuman traditions. Therefore, it is not surprising that these women have no option other than submitting to the local authorities or becoming scapegoats in brutal customs like Karo Kari (a form of honor killing practiced in Sindh), and forced marriages. Ayesha Jalal points out that for women who are "neither poor nor unlettered, submission can be socially rewarding. So long as they do not transgress social norms…." Moreover, women from middle as well as upper classes are accorded respect and also enjoy some autonomy (78). This point is significant, as transgression of any kind, for instance, marrying without acquiescence of the family, can have dire consequences for women; occasionally, it can even lead to incarceration or murders for revenge.

When it comes to the third world politics related to gender issues, it would be pertinent to look at what some Indian theorists have to say about sexual politics and violence against women. In 'Sexual Class in India,' Modi and Mathre argue that Indian women are incapable of 'speaking', and that the 'the public voice of Indian woman has long been stifled by a male-dominated society and her present silence on the problems she faces are related to a self –image (which is severely distorted and repressed)'(qtd in Guha 96). Rai also argues with Spivak that a "weak system of internal regulation" is another feature of the third world states with high level of state violence (17). Gayatri Spivak, while discussing Mahaswata Devi's short story, *Draupadi*, writes in detail about police torture on women in custody in rural areas specifically. Draupadi, the central character, is a tribal woman on the wanted list of the police, and "the men easily succeed in stripping Dopdi (Draupadi)—in the narrative it is the culmination of her political punishment by the representatives of the law" (184). The story

illustrates that police torture is at its highest when the victims are women, as Spivak argues: "It is when she (Dopdi) crosses the sexual differential into field of what could only happen to a woman that she emerges as the most powerful "subject," who, becomes "the object" of their search," and "an unarmed target" (184).

The key question is as to why women resort to committing crimes and what happens within the iron bars and claustrophobic walls of the prisons. If we take a look at what kind of women are incarcerated and the nature of their crimes, it would not be hard to discern that most women from middle and upper strata are convicted for political activism, or for raising their voice against injustices perpetrated on women. On the other hand, women from working class and peasantry are generally convicted for the crimes they commit either due to injustices, domestic violence, or extreme poverty. Noting this paradoxical nature of the status of women in the Islamic state of Pakistan, Jalal writes about the eleven years of repressive and tyrannical martial law: "After nearly a decade of state-sponsored attempts at stifling women's voices in the public arenas and pushing back the boundaries of social visibility, Pakistan has become the first state in the Islamic world to have a woman Prime minister" (77). Coming to power in an Islamic state which remained in the grip of martial law, was not an easy task for Benazir Bhutto, daughter of Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, who was sacked due to military coup in 1977, and was hanged in 1979 after undergoing severe torture during his imprisonment. All these years, Benazir had to suffer for her political activism and struggle to restore democracy and human rights that had been completely withheld during the decade. Narrating her visits to her father during his imprisonment, Benazir writes:

> Iron gates, one after another. Long dirty passageways in between. Police matrons searching me, going through my hair, running their hands over my arms, my chest, my shoulders. Another iron gate. Then three small cells with iron bars in the doors…
>
> I peer into the cell, but I am blinded by its darkness. The jail authorities open the door, and I step inside my father's death cell (143).

Reminiscing about her own dark days and repeated incarcerations at the age of 26, Benazir writes: "I pace the corridors of Al-Murtaza (their residence in Larkana). This is my mother's ninth political detention and

my seventh since the coup two years ago, I still can't adjust to the forced isolation. Each incarceration is just adding another layer of anger" (36). Benazir spent the prime time of her life in prisons and remained in exile after she was allowed to leave the country for her medical treatment in London.

The Acquittal by Shahid Nadeem, written in 1987 while he was in London in exile, graphically paints the abject conditions of Pakistani jails and their inmates. In spite of being a privileged male Pakistani citizen, Nadeem unveils the inhuman and derogatory treatment inflicted on women in prisons, exposing simultaneously the circumstances and forces that are involved in bringing them to this deplorable state. The play also focuses on the patterns of torture designed specifically for female prisoners, and the way female prisoners interact with each other, and their gradually developing collective feminine consciousness. The play reveals an interplay of power relations between the politician and the policeman, between the clergy and the patriarchs, who all control the system, perpetuating legalized oppressive mechanisms. Simultaneously, the very coercive system also reveals the gaps and fissures that allow for expressions of freedom and transgression.

The Acquittal traces the lives of four incarcerated women in the prison whose stories unfold gradually with appalling details that reveal the stronghold of the patriarchal structure of Pakistani society. The play illustrates what happens when four women of the same society hailing from different economic groups and diverse backgrounds are packed in a claustrophobic space. Most of the events take place outside the confines of the jail cell which are narrated by the inmates in retrospect. However, the way female prisoners are verbally and physically abused is illustrated through dialogue and off stage happenings.

Barri corresponds perfectly to Foucault's description of modern architecture which for him symbolizes a psychologically incarcerated society. Pakistani society is a large physical prison where women are forced to be docile, live under constant surveillance, and are forced to abide by the laws legislated by the dominant male members of society. Any violation of these laws means punishment and in the context of Pakistani penal system, it means that the criminals or the accused may have to remain imprisoned for far longer periods of time than the actual sentence they are supposed to serve. Using the prison cell as a metaphor throughout the play, Nadeem questions the definitions of crime and punishment in our gender and class-oriented society. The dictatorial regime of General Zia-ul-Haq with his gender biased laws like Hudood

ordinance provoked women throughout the country. As a consequence of Zia's oppressive policies many political movements for women's rights surfaced during the 1980s, leading to arrests and torture of the women on the forefront.

The Acquittal begins with the narrator, Zahida, "vice-president of the Women's Association and an active member of the Democratic Party" as she relates her experience during her three- month imprisonment with other female inmates. Zahida reads out the stories of those women from her diary she used to write during her confinement. These stories or, the "microsocial" worlds of women's experiences critique the "macrosocial" patriarchal oppressive states, and elaborate upon the ways in which the women's bodies become one of many sites of state control.

The play comprises 14 individual scenes. The first scene reveals Zahida who is also the narrator, reading her diary. She introduces herself to the audience as vice-president of the Women's Association and also an active member of the Democratic Party. She addresses the audience directly, and begins to narrate how she was arrested and spent three months in the prison, "on charges of going on a hunger strike in connection with changes in the family laws" (Nadeem 54).The scene serves the purpose of exposition while Zahida as the narrator also fulfils the role of the chorus. The next scene is used as a flashback and shifts to the prison cell, revealing incidents that occurred in the past during her incarceration.

This scene commences with Zahida's entry into the prison cell; she is actually pushed into the dreary and dismal cell by the crude prison officials; in the background, loud and gruff male voices and laughter can be heard, mocking at the "Begum Sahib (madam)." Here Zahida, in a state of shock and bewilderment, encounters other inmates for the first time, who watch her with awe, apprehensive to see a new arrival. Zahida is also flustered at first to see the strange women, and declares that she is a "political prisoner", not "a criminal," creating a gulf between herself and the "criminals" who are now intimidated by the presence of this upper class, educated lady.

Nadeem here creates a class barrier by directing the audience's attention to small and intricate details of the contents of Zahida's handbag, and the way she examines the cell with an air of haughtiness, complaining constantly about the dinginess, and the pervasive unpleasant odor of her new abode. The other three inmates are not introduced here, but it is

made clear later that all of them hail from low income groups and are uneducated. One of the three 'strange' women, elderly and religious, constantly prays, continually turning her beads; the second one just stares at her or the wall silently; the third one is still not clearly defined in this scene. The scene exposes the myths about prisoners that they are *different*, and that they are lowly, despicable *creatures*, dangerous to the civilized world, need to be debunked simultaneously. In *Barri* too, Zahida realizes that she also, like others, held that prejudice that those women were criminals, thus different from her, but soon enough, this myth is dispelled. This moment comes as a revelation that she had deemed herself superior to those poor women, and that in the beginning, she felt "unsafe" in their presence. The understandings that unite these women in prison come from their shared experiences of separation, of disempowerment, of the continual physical abuse they face in the prison environment (102).

Before her encounter with her female inmates in the prison, Zahida had only a superficial knowledge of the problems faced by working class women. However, after serving her sentence in the jail, she faces the real horror of the circumstances poor women have to face in the everyday world. Nadeem shows how incarceration stigmatizes women and, therefore, once sentenced to imprisonment, women are perceived as outcasts. Zahida undergoes a humiliating experience before she enters the jail cell: "They thought they could make me submit to a search. I openly refused to be searched by men. They had to bring in a female attendant. Searched by men. In a Muslim country. I said frankly. Is this your Islam (56)?" She refuses to submit to their brute force; her body becomes a site of resistance. It is hard for her to get used to a restricted and controlled life in the beginning: "... here there was rationing of fresh air and light. Twice during the day we were allowed to go out for a stroll. The rest of the time we were closed up in the cell" (57). She reveals that their restrictions multiplied since one female prisoner tried to set fire to the ward and was burnt to death.

Nadeem reveals this through the attitude of these inmates, the "strange women" looking at Zahida in awe in the dark and smelly cell. Jannat Bibi is a middle–aged woman imprisoned because her son, accused of stealing a tape recorder, is a fugitive, and in his place, she has been taken into custody. Jamila, a young and beautiful woman in her early twenties, is awaiting death sentence for murdering her old and cruel husband. She is depicted as a strong young woman who is constantly in a state of uncontrolled anger. Jamila's association with the

mirror is significant, as she loves to view her image often in the fragmented piece that reflects her shattered dreams, and a life cut short and thwarted.

Maryam, a young woman, was arrested on charges of dancing in a shrine, and thus violating the sanctity of the place and the law. During her imprisonment, Maryam gets raped by the jail authorities and as a consequence, gets pregnant. Zahida, after listening to their stories, comes to realize the vulnerable situation Pakistani women are in, without any agency or control over their own lives or bodies. The play is a true dramatization of Foucault's analysis of power relations and the body: "… the body is also directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs" (173. Bunster-Burotto, exploring the nature of torture against women, reveals that "such torture takes various forms: violating the "chastity" of a woman through rape…; and forcing the pregnant women into sexual slavery by taking control of their offspring, torturing them into aborting, or appropriating their new-born children" (qtd in Kavita Punjabi 157).

When Zahida questions Marium about the baby's father, Jamila replies: All the officers of the jail are its fathers… people can't find one father and this fortunate one has no dearth of them. Do you understand Zahida Begum (madam)? (64) Later in the scene, Marium is taken by force to have a medical examination: "*The knock continues. Suddenly Marium screams as if she is being raped by several men*. Jannat: May be the labor pains have started.. *Outside, the voices of the warders and their swearing are heard"* (75). The prison wardens force Mariam to undergo abortion against her will to conceal their crime. She had refused to terminate the pregnancy because of the motherly love she had developed for the unborn child. Marium's heart-rending screams during the painful procedure which is happening off-stage, can be heard on stage. Marium is not just a passive victim, she registers her protest in subtle and sometimes in overt ways; her screams, her dance, her refusal to yield to the prison wardens are disparate way of her rebellion. Ultimately, she is unable to thwart her abortion because of her imprisonment, her body is in the grip of forces beyond her control. Her transgression is only symbolic, when she sings the sufi poet Bulleh Shah's verses, who was against the religious orthodox state, and the clerics of the era.

Pakistani society aptly depicts Foucault's notion that in every society, the body is in the grip of very strict powers, and the state exercises a "subtle coercion, ... an infinitesimal power" over the active (*female*) body" (181). Foucault does not specifically make it gender specific when he theorizes about power, but he does indicate that power relations between man and woman reflect and reinforce state power. As Foucault stresses here:

> The family, even now, is not a simple reflection or the extension of the power of the State; it does not act as the representative of the State in relation to children, just as the male does not act as its representative with reflection to the female. For the state to function in the way it does, there must be between male and female or adult and child, quite specific relations of domination, which have their own configuration and relative autonomy. (*Power/ Knowledge* 187)

How the male family members control women's bodies using religion and juridical system as "disciplinary power mechanisms" by keeping women unaware of their legal rights is dramatized by Jamila's story. It highlights another poignant issue in Pakistani society, that is, when girls of tender age are forced to marry against their will owing to extreme poverty or other reasons. Jamila was forced to marry the man who was old enough to be her grandfather, at a very tender age. Severely tortured and controlled by her husband she despised, Jamila finally eloped with her lover, only to be discovered and imprisoned by the old man, later. She took the opportunity to get an axe from the inner chamber, when released from ropes, and murdered her husband to his utter surprise and horror. After listening to her story, Zahida informs Jamila that she could have pursued a divorce through court instead of committing the crime which was her legal right. This scene also validates the traditional feminist conception that power within gender relations is basically 'top-down and repressive' (Davis 79). Kathy Davis argues against this concept of asymmetrical power relations where women transform into 'cultural dope,' powerless to change their circumstances, and are 'misguided victims of what used to be dubbed 'false consciousness' (81). But, I argue and the play also depicts that these women are indeed victims of 'false consciousness,' because of their ignorance, which is the consequence of economic imbalance in society. However, the play illustrates that in spite of belonging to the lowest rung of society, they do struggle to exercise control, often in microscopic or sometimes even in trivial ways to undermine

asymmetrical power relations. Often, ignorance and extreme frustration caused by repressive circumstances force these women to committing heinous crimes with tragic consequences.

Here the play reveals fissures or gaps where these women, by transgressing the societal norms, strive to take control of their lives. I will now examine how the playwright dramatizes strategies of resistance in the play or creates dramaturgies of freedom using Kershaw's phrase.

Jamila's murder of her husband can be seen as a subversive act but this is how she becomes an autonomous subject, acquiring a self-conscious identity. As Foucault argues about power relations and subject formation, "the subject does not precede power relations, in the form of an individual consciousness, but is produced through relations, which form the necessary conditions of its possibility" (qtd in Mahmood 17). According to this notion of subject formation, Jamila's act is a consequence of the societal forces and pressures that have worked on her and shaped her subjectivity. Jamila's uncontrolled anger and her rebellious nature, according to Saba Mahmood's observations on Foucault, are "the abilities that define her mode of agency," which are not the residue of an undominated self that existed prior to the operations of power but are themselves the products of those operations" (18). Thus, Jamila's agency is not simply a synonym for resistance to relations of domination, but a capacity for action that specific relations of subordination create and enable. As Jamila expresses her extreme anger and disgust while narrating her story:

> If I had an axe, I would slaughter them one by one.(*her action indicate murderous intent*) I would first strike at the father who never thought I was as good as his sons and forced me to marry the old man; then I would strike at my brother who cared only for his honor and never for my happiness, then at the shopkeeper who always looked at me lecherously and made fun of my misfortune, then at the mullah who performed my marriage forcibly in the name of Islam, and the policeman… and the judge who will decide my fate tomorrow… and these warders who won't allow us a moment of peace. (75)

Jamila's tirade against the men who ruined her life, reveals the whole structure of patriarchy which keeps women oppressed and deprived of their rights, and drives them to crime. This illustrates how the disease is actually located in the patriarchal functioning of society, the state, and the judiciary, not in the women's actions which are judged to be

"criminal." The text reveals how the "rationality" of the state, in its treatment of the prisoners, focuses on the nature of the crime, not the cause for it.

The play uses these stories as springboard for probing the system of domination which includes the state, the family structure, and lastly, religious orthodoxy to uphold morality. As Kavita Punjabi notes, "They juxtapose the physical and psychological torture of the women with the discourse of state "morality," revealing it to be a patriarchal construct designed to control women's lives" (155). Marium was arrested and then imprisoned because she had dared to dance in a shrine which is an offence, an act against the norms of morality in an Islamic country. Dancing is considered an immoral activity which is specifically performed by prostitutes confined in the red light area. Although according to Sufi tradition, dancing is a way to arrive at a spiritual state; transporting the dancer to a spiritual realm, making her/him oblivious of his/her corporeal existence and uniting him/her with God. Dancers at most shrines whirl their way to a state of spirituality, making them oblivious of their material existence. Marium in the play is described by her inmates as a "Dervaish-like" being, a saint-like woman.

Zahida, as well, after her release, declares openly that she is not intimidated by the law enforcing agencies: "Yes, I was saying that people are claiming that Zahida Zaman is scared. It is true that since my release I haven't participated in the meetings of the Association or the party. But that doesn't mean I'm scared. However, I am no longer the Zahida Zaman of old whom all of you knew… . I was infuriated the way police behaved and then that police search in jail" (Nadeem 54). Zahida as the narrator, registers her resistance and protests against the system through her writing, and in Helene Cixous' words, becomes a Woman who "must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies" (*Medusa* 334). As Zahida writes:"I was not able to write in my diary for many days. I didn't know what to write, words failed me. Perhaps the right words have not been invented to describe what was unfolding before us. After all, men have invented both language and the dictionary" (75). Cixous argues: "It is men who have "driven away" women from writing and it is men who have confiscated their bodies, their voices, and thus their writing in order to defend patriarchal order, which they fail to realize crushes them equally" (*Medusa* 339). Here in the play, by deciding to write, Zahida challenges "the historical and

political constructions, of subverting the dominant linguistic order, and of representing themselves (women)" (*Medusa* 339).

Many plays depicting prison in the dramatic space explore "the perverse disciplinarity of the idioms of incarceration" at the same time exploring some sources of radical freedom" (Kershaw 46) One form of resistant and transcendent act is the use of folk songs and dance in *The Acquittal*. At one point in the play, the inmates sing a folk song which mocks and defies all the instruments of authority while performing a traditional dance:

The Mullah's (religious cleric) belly is big

Hit the mullah's head with a stick.

The mullah's beard is long

The mufti's pajama is wide.

And in his hands a water-pot.

The officer's face is unsightly

The judge's court is a sham.

Their coin is not authentic.

The policeman's uniform is unbecoming

The whole world is afraid of him, I will break his stick.

The friends dance in a circle,

Heer's bed is large

Ranjha's pillow too small.

Despite their differences in class, occupation, and age, the dancers enact a vision of unity, however transient. The inmates are admonished and warned by the male warders to keep quiet and stop the merry making but the women ignore their warnings and continue dancing, laughing out loudly. As Helen Gilbert notes: "Dance is a theatricalized activity that also acts as an alienating device in Brechtian sense,… it not only acts as an expression of individuality but also as an equalizer, a physical and social force which erodes hierarchies…" (239). But this song mocks the nexus of the patriarchs in Pakistani society which includes mullahs, judges and the law enforcing agencies, also including Heer and Ranjha, the protagonists in a traditional folk/love story who defy the norms and elope, only to be killed in the end. The song also creates the transcendent moment of radical freedom,

satirically lambasting the male-dominated systems of oppressive control. As Boire notes, "This is a sort of folk humor and witty repartee that most post-colonial prison theatre consistently employs. The play aptly projects Foucault's illustration of the basic methodology of the body as text, the reversal of the fool's festival, the scapegoat ritual, a mocking mime, folk humor which mimics official ceremonies, etc" (28). It also appropriately fits into the category of the carnivalesque described by Bakhtin, a form which directly disrupts all forms of official authority and systems of hegemony and totalitarian control:

> One might say that carnival celebrated liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all the hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed. (9)

Thus, this feature is employed to oppose the existing social order and hierarchy, and as a transcendent strategy to explore some form of liberation and self-affirmation in post-colonial as well as in feminist theatre practice.

Another form of resistance is writing and documenting the lives of the inmates, by exposing what goes on behind the bars. Zahida as the narrator, in Helene Cixous' words, becomes a Woman who "must write herself" (*Medusa* 334). She is not able to write in her diary for many days, words fail her. As Zahida writes: "Perhaps the right words have not been invented to describe what was unfolding before us. After all, men have invented both language and the dictionary" (75). Cixous argues: "It is men who have "driven away" women from writing and it is men who have confiscated their bodies, their voices..."(*Medusa* 339). Here in the play, by deciding to write, Zahida challenges "the historical and political constructions" by subverting the "dominant linguistic order", and gives voice to all the imprisoned women (*Medusa* 339). But Zahida can only give voice to these silenced women; she is unable to change their status; Jamila is awarded a death sentence, Jannat Bibi is acquitted too after her son is arrested; Zahida is released as well but Marium is shown sitting as a solitary figure shrouded in darkness, singing a folk song. Marium's fate is left dubious; and the play is left open-ended.

The Acquittal revealed how the state, religion, and family structure create power relations that dominate women and perpetuate

systems of control, and how women are incarcerated due to crimes committed for being unaware of their rights. Women are controlled by "disciplinary power mechanisms", as Davis argues and I agree that "gender ideology is the disciplinary discourse running parallel to and reinforcing state power" (135).

Now I will examine the structure of *Barri/ The Acquittal* in the light of the feminist/ postcolonial prison theatre dramaturgy. *The Acquittal* is episodic, structured in non-linear fashion. The play moves back and forth in time, but the past has not been dramatized directly, rather the incidents are narrated by different characters in retrospect. The space remains the jail cell throughout the play, which emphasizes the claustrophobic, suffocating surroundings of the inmates: "The acting area should be restricted as the cell is a confined space" (Nadeem 53). All action which happens backstage can be heard, not dramatized on the stage, for instance, the forced abortion of Marium, her screams off stage can be heard but the rest is left to be visualized or imagined by the audience. Male characters/ prison guards are not represented on the stage but their voices can be heard off stage. There are clear stage directions regarding this aspect of the play: "The warders (male) should remain invisible and have loud and crude voices" (Nadeem 53).

The Acquittal has a female protagonist, Zahida, the narrator, who, as I mentioned earlier in the discussion, writes her diary in the prison, thereby giving voice to all the women inmates who have been silenced. This also conforms to 'absence of a leader or a director' noted by Karlyn Kors Cambell in her analysis of feminist theatre where she argued that "the 'consciousness raising' rhetoric of feminism advocated collective self-determination by women, as opposed to the dominant rhetorical mode in which a single rhetorician persuades his listener(s) audience to accept his argument" (Aston 59). *The Acquittal*, gradually develop this collective feminine consciousness as the play moves towards the end.

Moreover, Aston outlines three major strands in feminist theatre aesthetics that are mainly followed; bourgeois, radical/cultural, and socialist/materialist (64). As Elaine Aston notes that there have been many attempts by women to define "feminist theatre" or "rather lame assertion that anything about women is necessarily feminist" (64). Goodman, in a survey of 'feminist theatre in Britain' defines this as 'loosely (re)defined as theatre which works in some way to present positive images of women, or to improve the status of women in the theatre(even if written by men or produced by mixed-gender companies'

(Goodman 68). However, according to Aston, Wandor's approach of "seeking not to label but to 'evaluate the nature of feminist dynamic,' or dynamics" is more stimulating (64). Thus, in this context, both texts under consideration in this study can be labelled as feminist plays. But, it still needs to be looked at as to which category of feminist theatre can best describe these plays. I will not analyze both the bourgeois- and radical-feminist perspectives here but the plays under discussion roughly fall into the category of socialist/materialist-feminist dynamic. As Aston argues, socialist/materialist feminism is distinct in its take as it identifies and locates oppression in terms of the complex pattern of gender, class, race, ideology, etc., and at the same time, seeks to transform the society (73). Basically, this kind of theatre was based on the acting methods and ideology theorized and practiced by Brecht and followed by feminists in the 1970s whose alienating techniques directly challenged the aesthetics and ideology of the classic realist tradition. The use of Brechtian techniques in *The Acquittal* emerges in the play's 'gestic techniques of disruption,' that incorporate the elements of dance, song, direct audience address, and the narrative structure which is episodic.

Now I will examine the plays from the lens of postcolonial prison theatre aesthetics as enumerated by Boire. According to Boire, post-colonial prison theatre manifests power in two forms, and after the performance is over, the spectators are obliged to make a choice, a political allegiance. One is official-- the discourse of Law and Discipline, and the other is the unofficial, that is, a kind of 'carnivalesque parody' (22). While discussing the postcolonial prison theatre practiced in Australia, New Zealand and Canada, Boire observes certain generic features that run through this kind of theatre as a common thread, like theme, structure and techniques. They indicate a kind of shared legacy of colonialism and concern with social inequities and injustices prevalent in postcolonial societies existing during and after the process of decolonization. The most prominent characteristic employed on an overt generic level is the stock characters and situations, and in the covert manner is the element of the carnivalesque parody (22). Moreover, in Boire's view:

> Like their ancestors in their chain- gang, post-colonial prison plays actively subvert the mechanisms of correction through a saturnalian parodic imitation. Like a conventional *buildungsroman,* most introduce a new inmate into an established community; stock features include reticence to

> advertise his/her crime; a sexual power struggle for possession of the new 'pet'; mock trials; a sympathetic adviser figure; a 'party' of initiation (often violent, sexual or both); and, most importantly, an emergence of a grotesque family structure. (23)

All the essential components of a post-colonial prison play listed by Boire can be discerned in *The Acquittal*, for instance, 'the initiation of the neophyte,' Zahida, the narrator's entrance into the prison cell has been portrayed quite dramatically, with her reticence in the beginning and other inmates' resistance to reveal the nature of their crimes. Class barriers that rendered Zahida as the Other, in the eyes of other inmates in the beginning, are removed gradually, and a sense of collective consciousness is developed among all the women.

The saturnalian moment in *The Acquittal* occurs when the inmates celebrate Marium's ritual of gode-bharai (filling the lap of the expectant mother with fruit), by singing traditional folk songs and performing Punjabi dance, though this celebration is ironic as the child will be born out of wedlock, as a consequence of Maryam's rape by the prison officials. I have already discussed this point earlier in the chapter.

Another aspect, in Boire's analysis, mostly employed as a recurrent trope in this kind of theatre is the isolation cell or the prisoners' accounts of torture perpetrated in solitary confinement, also referred to as 'butchery, a kitchen or a dungeon' (24). This is where female inmates are physically abused and sexually harassed, in complete isolation when everything is veiled from the outside world or other inmates.

Another characteristic that is usually employed in this kind of theatre is the role of abusive and crude wardens. Boire notes this in regards with the crucial role of the wardens in prison theatre in John Herbert's *Fortune and Men's Eyes*, Hilary Beaton's *Outside /In*, and Jim Mcneil's *The Old Familiar Juice*. In Boire's view, "… all revolve around a controlling hierarchy… Although they frequently mention the awesome power of the Warden, never once do they allow this character onstage. Akin to Foucault's principle of panoptic controller, the Warder is always a faceless authority, exercising power behind the theatrical curtain, away from the public gaze" (24).

Finally, I argue that the criminal justice system and prisons exacerbate the condition of an already marginalized segment of society, irrespective of geographical region, race or religion. Whether it is in the USA, or Britain, India or Pakistan, the rate of women's incarceration

has been increasing for the past two decades, leading to sexual abuse and maltreatment in every mode imaginable that further traumatizes the women. Mostly, the imprisoned women are from the poorest and the marginalized communities, rendered more vulnerable due to their socio-economic conditions. The play depicts the failure of criminal justice system and the inability of prison system to rehabilitate the convicts, on the contrary, the rate of recidivism is on the rise.

Many theatre activists in the USA, who have worked inside prisons like Rhodessa Jones, Michael Balfour in the UK, Nadeem and Madeeha Gauhar in Pakistan, and Mahaswata Devi in India believe that theatre can be used as an effective medium to question the legitimacy of current structures of power that directly impact and control women's lives. Their plays and works suggest that there can be other alternatives to incarceration. As Maud Clark, a prison theatre activist writes: "Prison does not work, it is a brutalizing and archaic system whose violence perpetuates itself. … An officer came to see the play, *Call My Name,* a play exploring women's experiences in prison, the officer came stumbling from the theatre saying, 'If this is what I've been doing—it's wrong' (106). Lastly, I would end my discussion with Baz Kershaw's views in regards with prison theatre where he argues that:

> Drama and theatre can significantly contribute to the collective and individual creation of autonomous subjects, especially through an engagement with the systems of formalized power in an effort to create radical freedom. Such freedom can be achieved through actions which combine resistant and transcendent ideological dynamics, which oppose dominant ideologies and also at least gesture to possibilities beyond them. (49)

Finally, I would say with Maud Clark, that "if theatre is working, audiences will be taken on a journey, they will feel what the character feels, their hearts will be engaged, their imagination awakened, they will understand the experience not only from their head but from the very cells in their body. This is where theatre can activate change and to posit possibilities structures other than prison" (105).

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