

Performing Arts Can Play a Crucial Role in Eradicating Patriarchal Violence

Ibra Ammad Butt

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Introduction

Patriarchal violence, a pervasive issue in society, revolves around the exertion of power and control by men over women and marginalized genders.¹ This practice involves various forms of abuse like physical, sexual, emotional, and also economic coercion. Entrenched structurally and ideologically, 'patriarchal violence' is supported by societal institutions like religious and state laws. Such practices perpetuate gender inequality, and disparities in employment, political participation, and education, whilst normalizing violence against women.² The prevalence of patriarchal violence has normalized its existence, underscoring the importance of acknowledging its complexity and impact.

A potential tool that can break the patriarchal norm is art, particularly performing arts. Performing arts are an important medium that can influence culture to reinforce and counter patriarchy. Described as a 'meeting of the visual arts and theatre which grew out of mainstream theatre',³ performing arts consist of the 'values traditionally attached to art' which helps establish a new order of nature and advocates for structuring positive changes in society.⁴ Performing arts can change global narratives and foster activism through storytelling and aesthetics.⁵ It integrates various art forms like music, theatre, dance, acting, and more, creating visually engaging experiences that enable the audience to connect with complex realities whilst fostering a physical and sensory connection to expression and perspectives.⁶

Having a rich history in the Indian subcontinent dating

back to the 1st century, performing arts were a medium that used storytelling and narrative formation. Let alone storytelling, performing arts also engaged in political and civic discourses for various protests and movements. Primarily seen as an entertainment channel, performing arts proved to be more than that, becoming a catalyst for change over time.

Initially, this medium started to play a role in the abolishment of patriarchy in the 19th century. In the late 1960s and early 1970s in the West, the first method used to demonstrate against the objectification of women was the deconstructive strategy.⁷ In 1972, Faith Wilding's performance titled 'Waiting' featured her sitting on a chair, gently rocking, symbolizing her anticipation of advancing in age.⁸ Through this act, she poetically conveyed her inner struggles, deconstructing the societal limitations that hindered her independence as a woman during her life. The exclusively female audience resonated deeply with this thought-provoking performance, as it illuminated the constraints they too experienced in their lives.

Theatre has the power to control an audience⁹ and every routine or systematic reality has the power to trigger a person and awaken their conscience to possibly relate to a sequence that they witness. Studies have shown that humans preserve information better through visual stimuli and realize the importance of the natural environment better with performing or visual arts.¹⁰

Pakistan is among the countries where patriarchy persists as a prevailing societal framework, signifying a social structure where men wield authority and control over women.¹¹ According to the UN Women Global Database, violence against women in 2016 in Pakistan was recorded at 24.5% with relevance to Lifetime Physical and/or Sexual Intimate Partner Violence. In 2018, it rose to 28%.¹² During COVID-19, it rose even more. About 1,422 cases

¹ Gwen Hunnicutt, "Varieties of Patriarchy and Violence against Women: Resurrecting 'Patriarchy' as a Theoretical Tool." *Sage Journals*, (2009): 553-573.

² Ibid

³ Colin Chambers, *The Continuum companion to twentieth century theatre*, A&C Black, 2002.

⁴ Ann McCulloch, *Dance of the Nomad: A Study of the Selected Notebooks of A.D.Hope*. ANU press, 2010.

⁵ Harvard Political Review, "Performance Art as an Activist Tool." March 7, 2020. <https://harvardpolitics.com/performance-art-activism/>

⁶ Olafur Eliasson, "Why art has the power to change the world." *World Economic Forum*, January 18, 2016. <https://www.weforum.org/>.

⁷ Deconstructive strategy refers to breaking the work into pieces to make the audience grasp the message better.

⁸ Jeanie Forte, "Women's Performance Art: Feminism and Postmodernism." *Theatre Journal*, Vol 40, No.2, (1988): 217-235.

⁹ John Brown, *What is Theatre? An Introduction and Exploration*, (Boston: Focal Press, 1997).

¹⁰ Lauren Butler, "Dance and Mixed-Media Performance for Building Scientific Understanding and Environmental Respect." *Columbia University*, No. 19, (2018). <https://doi.org/10.7916/consilience.v0i19.3937>

¹¹ Asian Pacific Institute on Gender-based Violence, "Patriarchy & Power." <https://www.api-gbv.org/about-gbv/our-analysis/patriarchy-power/>

¹² Nida Kirmani, "The past few months have been harrowing for Pakistani women." *ALJAZEERA*, October 8, 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/>.

of domestic violence and 9,000+ cases of violence against women were reported during the last six months of 2020.¹³

Despite patriarchal constraints, performing arts made its place in challenging these problematic norms in Pakistan. One artist who initiated using this tool is Salima Hashimi whose performance on PTV 'Anda ubalna' became popular as a comedy program. There are several feminist articulated performances that challenged patriarchy in the 1980s, when the military regime imposed censorship policies.¹⁴ Dancers, activists, teachers, and performing artists like Sheema Kermani, Naheed Siddiqui, Lala Rukh, and Sameena Mansoor are a few names that went far in challenging patriarchal society through their art practice. Nusra Latif Qureshi, Masooma Syed, Aisha Khalid, and Farida Batool devised new forms and ways for the presentation of women in the media, defying existing patriarchal structures. Similarly, by redefining the female character and the ownership of their own body, stereotypical roles of women have been challenged by artists like Misha Japnawala and Shehzil Malik.¹⁵

Ajoka Theater, Alhamra Art Center, Tehrik-e-Niswaan, Punjab Lok RaHS, The Colony Lahore, Olomopolo Media, Sangat Theater, International Association of Theater for Children and Young People (ASSITEJ) are some of the theatre groups that continue to preserve and develop the performing arts tradition in Pakistan despite patriarchal constraints. Plays like Barri, Ek Thi Nani, Jhalli Kithay Javay, and Dhee Rani¹⁶ by Ajoka Theater and Lok RaHS created awareness in the most challenging of times and are still relevant today, making Pakistani women realize how unaware they are of their social, civil, and political rights, in a society where men continue to hold status and power.

But despite the presence of such institutions, performing

arts in Pakistan lag significantly in progressive influence, with TV dramas, commercial theatre, and films being the dominant forms. Pakistani artists often overlook the profound impact performing arts can have on society.¹⁷ Pakistani media often reinforces traditional gender stereotypes, depicting women as submissive and suffering, while sometimes romanticizing abusive marriages and violence, thus normalizing these phenomena among the audiences.¹⁸ Punjabi commercial theatre encourages women performances for the sole purpose of entertaining males, subjecting women to sexism and vulgar jokes, and causing misconceptions about theatre art as a positive tool for change. Although empowered women are shown in some TV dramas like Udaari,¹⁹ a drama on the subject of child rape; Baaghi, based on the dreadful practice of honour killings in Pakistan; Akhri Station and Yakeen ka Safar,²⁰ still most dramas continue to reinforce existing patriarchal norms. Thus, while performing arts has the potential to raise awareness about patriarchal issues among the masses, the Pakistani drama industry, primarily driven by profit, does not prioritize women empowerment. Instead, smaller organizations like Ajoka Theater, Dastak, Lok RaHS, Sangat and others have taken on social problems, challenging the grip of patriarchy.²¹

Research Objective and Methodology

Overall, patriarchy still exerts a significant influence in Pakistan, sustained through both formal institutions like the country's legal framework and informal customs rooted in religious or customary practices. This system directly contributes to violence against women by perpetuating the notion of woman's subordination to man. Within this societal context, performing arts have a historical legacy of challenging patriarchy and questioning the normalization of violence against women. However, in Pakistan, the impact of performing arts in addressing this issue has been limited. Mainstream forms of perform-

¹³ ANI. "Domestic violence cases against Pakistani women increased during COVID-19 lockdown." *South Asia's Leading Multimedia News Agency*, May 27, 2024. <https://www.aninews.in/news/world/asia/domestic-violence-cases-against-pakistani-women-increased-during-covid-19-lockdown20210513144906/>

¹⁴ Naela Aamir, et al., "Expression of Feminist and Post-Feminist Sensibility in Pakistani." *Pakistan Social Sciences Review*, Vol. 2, No. 2, (2018): 295-311.

¹⁵ DAWN. "This Pakistani artist is challenging gender inequality with her work." February 1, 2018. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1385989>

¹⁶ Fawzia Afzal-Khan, "Street Theatre in Pakistani Punjab: The Case of Ajoka, Lok Rehas, and the Woman Question." *TDR* 41 (1997): 39.

¹⁷ Shumaila Ahmed and Juliana Abdul Wahab, "Paradox of Women Empowerment: The Representations of Women in Television Dramas in Pakistan." *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 9(10), (2019): 1-21.

¹⁸ Aqsa Younus, "Pakistani TV Dramas And Women's Roles: How Screen And Real-Life Influence Each Other." *THE FRIDAY TIMES*, December 31, 2021. <https://thefridaytimes.com/31-Dec-2021/pakistani-tv-dramas-and-women-s-roles-how-screen-and-real-life-influence-each-other>

¹⁹ Sadaf Haider, "In its finale, Udaari puts shame where it belongs — with the rapist." *IMAGES*, September 26 2016. <https://images.dawn.com/news/1176310>.

²⁰ Dipanwita, "These Five Women Centric Pakistani Dramas Are A Must-Watch - Put them on Your List." *She The People*, February 16, 2021. <https://www.shethepeople.tv/film-theatre/best-pakistani-dramas-khudgarz-mujhay-jeene-do-yaqeen-ka-safar/>.

²¹ Taimur Kayani and Arbaayah Ali Termezi, "Transcultural Adaptation of Brecht's Work by Ajoka Theatre in Pakistan: A Critical Review." *PAKISTAN SOCIAL SCIENCES REVIEW*, Vol. 1, No.1, (2017): 76-89.

ing arts, such as TV dramas and commercial theatre, often reinforce established patriarchal norms, while the sector that has a history of actively challenging patriarchy, like parallel theatre, remains on the fringes, and struggles for recognition.

This research utilizes qualitative research methods to understand whether the social theatre currently being practiced in Pakistan counters patriarchal violence. It analyses the productions of three theatre groups: Ajoka Theatre, Olomopolo Media and Sangat, to understand what aspects of patriarchy are countered. Furthermore, it evaluates culture policy to understand its relationship with the marginality of social theatre in Pakistan.

The research suggests various recommendations for Pakistani artists and encourages the policymakers to: recognize the significance of effectively implementing culture policy, raising awareness for performing arts in the educational realms, encouraging women's participation, providing support to established cultural institutions, and more. Sustaining and developing culture could additionally reap major economic benefits. Ultimately, this paper aims to shed light on the potential of social theatre to contribute towards social change and cultural development in Pakistan.

Findings: Countering Patriarchy Through Parallel Theatre in Pakistan

Lappar is a play by one of the oldest theatre groups of Pakistan, Ajoka Theater. Written by Shahid Nadeem, Director Ajoka, and directed by his wife, Madeeha Gauhar, the play exhibits the societal picture of women in Pakistan. 'Lappar', meaning slap, exposes the deeply rooted male-dominated system, illustrating the violence women endure on a day-to-day basis. It portrays how women's lives often revolve around violence, whereby society reinforces the idea that a 'slap' is their unfortunate fate. The play highlights factors like cultural, social, religious, and biological elements that perpetuate patriarchy in Pakistan, starting from gender-biased celebrations of male births as opposed to a female child, to violence against women. The play begins around the problematic understanding of gender biasness, women subordination and stigma against divorce which link women's fate to fortune, domestication and violence. Remarkably, it ends with the female

protagonist challenging the system by slapping her husband for his absurd reaction to her expecting a baby girl.

This play is pivotal in its essence as it is in Punjabi language and clearly spreads the message across to the audience. The fact that women from all classes can relate to 'lappar' as their fate signifies our deeply patriarchal society. The play informs and encourages women to educate themselves, be courageous enough to stand for what's right, and to call quits to abuse.

Meenu, a play produced by Olomopolo Media, a budding cultural institute based in Lahore. 'Meenu' revolves around a woman experiencing menopause. Indirectly addressing the violence women face due to entrenched patriarchal norms, this play portrays a lone taxi driver encountering past and future versions of herself, grappling with her present reality. The play dives into a taboo subject, revealing how the silence around women's bodies stems from cultural and historical patriarchal norms. It highlights the consequences of inadequate information and treatment for women, infringing upon their right to better health. The play symbolizes how 'shame' has been ingrained in women's sexuality by restricting awareness of their own physiological and biological processes. There is a clear message in the play that women need to educate themselves and know scientific facts about their body to be able to take care of it physically, mentally, and emotionally.

Chough Kausambey Di, a Punjabi poetic play is directed by Huma Safdar, the director of Sangat theatre group based in Lahore. Safdar clarifies that Sangat was established to adapt Punjabi literature and folk wisdom into theatre performances to familiarise contemporary audiences with their rich heritage. Critiquing patriarchy, *Chough Kausambey Di*, a 17th-century Punjabi poem by philosopher and Sufi poet Bulleh Shah, poetically highlights societal oppression rooted in cultural norms. The poem reveals how systemic violence often goes unnoticed in daily life, emphasizing the importance of speaking out against such mistreatment. Titled "Chough Kausambey Di", it portrays the exhaustion of women toiling in the fields, relentlessly picking safflower petals due to high demand from feudal lords, traders, and accountants. These women are exploited and not recognized for

their labour, receiving inadequate compensation for their valuable work.

The above listed theatre plays highlight the problematic cultural standards of society in Pakistan. In raising awareness and challenging cultural norms, they create hope for a better society though that requires theatre art to be promoted at a much larger scale in the country. Instead, there is a dearth of performing arts in the country because of different reasons inclusive of an identity crisis, religious constraints, and a lack of research, awareness and engagement. Further, commercial theatre has worked otherwise in reinforcing and sustaining patriarchy.

A fact to note is that the 1876 Dramatic Performance Act with vague provisions regarding scandalous, defamatory, or seditious content, still regulates theatre practices today, which means that theatre art is hardly given the needed attention to bloom. Instead of facilitating artists for theatre practices, the state bans, abandons or restricts small scale productions critical of cultural norms. Thus, non-profit and social sectors alone work for the sustenance of performing arts while the social theatre industry has done splendid work in promoting and preserving performing arts by itself. But for performing arts particularly theatre to have a larger impact on society, a joint investment by the state and non-profit sector is needed. Culture policy should thus consider potential actions by the state, non-profit sector and corporations for better institutional outcomes in the cultural domain.

Evaluating Punjab's Culture Policy & Institutions

The first Culture Policy of Pakistan was drafted and partially implemented by Faiz Ahmad Faiz when he was appointed as head of the National Council of the Arts in 1972. However, the Zia military dictatorship which took over after the Bhutto government was hostile to regional cultures as it considered Pakistan's pre-Islamic cultural heritage as contrary to the Pakistani identity. Thus, the culture policy was revived only after a long struggle in the post Zia era. The most recent Punjab Culture Policy was developed in 2021 after extensive engagement with over

160 artists and educators. The document acknowledges the need for state's support for cultural activities as these promote diversity, collective identity, cohesion and citizenship, adding vibrancy to the nation. It lists hundreds of possible actions that can be taken in the cultural sphere. However, the crucial step lies in prioritizing these actions according to a well thought out strategy, and its effective implementation.

More importantly though, many countries have started prioritizing and investing in culture as an industry, realizing the creative sectors' possible economic impact in addition to considering culture as 'merit good' and a necessity, for the benefit of the public at large.²² Direct or indirect public funding is one of the most convenient and readily available sources to support cultural initiatives. For example, The National Endowment Fund for Culture and the Arts (NEFCA), Philippines, is an agency specifically formed to implement culture and arts programs to align with the goals of the Medium Term Philippine Development Plan for Culture and the Arts.²³ Under this program, grants were given to seven arts and cultural organizations under the Innovation Grants Project 2020, to enhance art disciplines and generate art using advanced technologies.²⁴ Indirect funding, on the other hand, includes tax relief, voucher schemes or professional support by the government. For example, France provides tax incentives to the theatre community for enhanced and culturally articulated theatre through deconcentrated grants; tax credits to support artistic employment; creative assistance to improve theatrical scripts; guidance to young artistic teams via assistance for companionship; and opportunities to reach new audiences, etc.²⁵

Additionally, states also encourage private funding for cultural sustenance. For example, Korea's Motae Fund was setup by the Cultural Ministry with defined priority areas for cultural investment. This followed appointed private venture companies to raise and combine private investments with Motae Fund investments to invest in priority areas. This institutional mechanism has been an important element in the rise of K-pop.²⁶

²² "Home." The Culture Fix : Creative People, Places and Industries | OECD iLibrary. Accessed October 14, 2022. <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/29f05369-en/index.html?itemId=%2Fcontent%2Fcomponent%2F29f05369-en>.

²³ User, Super. "Govph." The Official Website of Philippine Consulate General in Milan, Italy. Accessed July 29, 2022. <https://milanpcg.dfa.gov.ph/the-philippines/philippine-art-culture.html>.

²⁴ "7 Arts Companies Receive CCP Innovation Grants." Accessed July 28, 2022. <https://www.bworldonline.com/arts-and-leisure/2021/07/07/380511/7-arts-companies-receive-ccp-innovation-grants/>

²⁵ "Règlementation, Dispositifs d'aides." Ministère de la Culture. Accessed October 14, 2022. <https://www.culture.gouv.fr/fr/Thematiques/Theatre-spectacles/Pour-les>

Lastly, the promotion of more feminist plays or supporting gender neutral participation in the performing arts is dependent on the change in state ideology. Although dancers like Amna Mawaz, Fatima Amjed, Suhae Abro, and others have continued the tradition of female participation in the performing arts, both greater participation as well as gender equal participation require state and societal support. France through its “Les pas culture”²⁷ voucher scheme, and Ireland with initiatives like the ‘Six Point Gender Plan’ that aims for gender parity in Irish theatre production²⁸ are some examples that can guide policy makers in Punjab and Pakistan to tackle this challenge.

While state contributions worldwide are fostering the dialogue of creativity and cultural adaptation, parallel theatre in Pakistan is yet to be seen as a viable profession as it lacks public as well as private support, while the non-profit and social sectors alone sustain performing arts. For parallel theatre to prosper, state’s support is required. Thus, Punjab’s Culture Policy should support collaborative initiatives by the state, non-profit, corporations and private cultural institutions for better cultural outcomes.

Conclusions & Recommendations

This study highlights how patriarchal structures in Pakistan lead to violence against women and suggests that performing arts, particularly theatre, can be a potent tool for challenging patriarchy. But despite historical significance, social theatre in Pakistan faces limitations, with commercial theatre often reinforcing patriarchy. While the state recognizes theatre’s potential for change, it falls short of providing the necessary support. Various factors contribute to the lack of performing arts to challenge the status quo, including limited resources, conservative influence, and societal resistance. Addressing these challenges is essential for leveraging the transformative power of performing arts in combating patriarchy in Pakistan. This requires state facilitation, collective efforts, and awareness raising among the general public to utilise the potential of performing arts to address gender inequality in the country. The study recommends following measures:

Promote Cultural Integration in Education: Include performing arts within the education curriculum to foster creativity and cultural appreciation among students, which will lay the foundation for a more culturally enriched society. Further, teaching regional languages in schools will preserve linguistic and cultural diversity while connecting the younger generation to their cultural heritage, and developing their sense of belonging.

Support Artists, Cultural Institutions & Festivals: Provide financial assistance and social protection to artists to ensure sustainable artistic livelihoods while encouraging them to contribute to the nation’s cultural landscape. Establishing a transparent funding framework will ensure equitable distribution of resources, supporting both individual artists and cultural institutions in their endeavours. Similarly, public sector facilitation of cultural festivals will raise community awareness regarding culture & arts, while developing pride in one’s cultural heritage.

Ensure Security and Balance Censorship: To promote culture, the state has to guarantee security for cultural performances, particularly in areas prone to extremist threats rather than shutting down cultural activities owing to security threats. Similarly, a much more balanced censorship policy is needed for the freedom of expression while maintaining cultural sensitivities.

Facilitate Collaborations & Gender Inclusivity: By encouraging global participation and hosting international workshops, Pakistan’s culture industry can broaden its artistic horizons through cultural exchange while elevating Pakistan’s cultural profile internationally. This is also dependent on women’s participation in the arts through the promotion of women-centric theatre for instance, which can challenge existing stereotypes and contribute to a more inclusive cultural narrative.

²⁶ Hye-Kyung Lee, “Supporting the cultural industries using venture capital: a policy experiment from South Korea” *Cultural Trends*, 31:1, (2021): 47-67.

²⁷ OECD, “The Culture Fix. *Local Economic and Employment Development (LEED)*” June 3, 2022.

Le pas Culture was born from the desire, affirmed during the 2017 presidential campaign, to provide 18-year-olds with a new system promoting access to culture in order to strengthen and diversify cultural practices, by revealing the cultural richness of the territories. First tested in 19 French departments, the pass Culture is now accessible at the national level since May 21, 2021.

²⁸ Kelsey Moore, “Irish Theaters Implement Gender Equality Policies.” *Women And Hollywood*, July 11, 2018. <https://womenandhollywood.com/>.



Ibra Ammad Butt is currently working as an Experience Analyst at a private firm based in the US with aspirations to pursue a Ph.D. in the near future.

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