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A Theatrical Study of Ikram Azam's *Short Peace Plays*

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Abstract: *This piece of research pursues the critical investigation of the distancing devices used in Ikram Azam's Short Peace Plays: The Quaid at the Jinnah Road, The Two Voices, The Vicious Circle, and The Sepulture. Naive characters with their simplistic but basic questions on the sociopolitical ailments confronting the nation alienate and orient the reader dynamically. The dialectical juxtaposition of characters, with multiple points of views, has always been a popular technique to produce the spectacular discourse. In addition to the unity of opposites, the role of the narratological analogies is well entrenched in these plays. Courts rooms and dead bodies play their role very tactfully in imparting staginess to the text. Wars and their impacts on each and every aspect of social life are not less important than other techniques of theatricality. Historical characters that remain an integral part of the unconsciousness and the conscience of the society. Memories, dreams, and histrionic words and actions also play their role to contribute to the theatrics of the data. The study is informed by Mohsen Mosilhi A. Barakat's Theatricality of Edward Bond's Plays (2021). The use of theatrical techniques produces a dynamic awareness of the burning issues of the Pakistani society.*

Key Words: Theatricality, Barakat, Ikram Azam, *Short Peace Plays*

Introduction

Artists of all the fine arts normally work as the self-regularizing forces in the given society. They are those agents of the social formation whose feelings, sensations, emotions, and experiences of the world of sense are more subtle and finer than those of the rest of the humans. Their dynamic aesthetics produces art that combines the social realities and the vision of the artist. Its aesthetic facet attracts the reader as the colors and smell of flowers hook the bees. Their art is supposed to entertain as well as instruct the reader. For this campaign of social reformation or enlightenment, they position themselves in such a way that their message is imparted to the targeted readership (Brecht, 198s). Their specific disposition and their level of commitment to society determine the choice

of their dramaturgical devices. However, one thing is final: they do fractionalize their poetics into alienating techniques. These formal elements provide vitality to the skeleton of an art. The vision of the arts works behind the form of the art. So, the exterior of literary data tempts the reader to access its interior through a particular angle (Papadi, 2007). Since ancient times, literary writers have been employing estrangement strategies that they thought would prove very helpful in stressing the intended objectives of their art.

Review of Literature

In the past, it was generally believed that theatricality is the other name of acting that takes place on the stage of a theatre. At the end of the previous century, this concept took a sea change. Now the, critics like Barakat hold

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that theatricality is the quality of a literary text, and it has nothing to do with the acting on the stage. Theatricality or the theatrical accounts for that feature of the aesthetic text that succeeds in grabbing the attention of the reader thoroughly. Wu [Hsin-fa \(1992\)](#) used the concept of the theatricality of the body in his PhD dissertation named *The Body Motif in Bertolt Brecht's Plays: A Study of His Theatrical Development*. The researcher uses the body as a metaphor of the subjectivity of an individual that the coercive system and exploitative ideologies have tamed, objectified, and dehumanized. Brecht's earlier play *Baal* is depersonalized at the hands of the capitalistic mechanism. The cultural and aesthetic aspects of his personality are backgrounded, and his drives, instincts, and basic needs of life are foregrounded to attract the reader to watch the animalistic side of a human-caused by the inhuman economic system. The protagonist of Brecht's *The Life of Galileo* has to retreat from his principled stand due to the threat to his physical body. His students cast a curse on him as he betrayed the cause of the truthful knowledge. The idealism of science, imagination, and learning is cast to the wind: the genuine scientist abandons his stand for the comfort of his body. It is a very useful piece of research that pursues theatricality that works through bodily trope.

Aleksandar Sasha [Dundjerovich \(1999\)](#) applied some unique traits of theatricality in her PhD thesis named *Theatricality of Robert Lepage: A Study of His Transformative 'Mise-en-Scene'*. Here theatricality accounts for "an individual comprised of interdisciplinary and intercultural influences, relevant to the post-modern world of shifting signifiers and perceptions" (p. vii). There are so many other cultural and artistic sources in addition to drama and theatre. Allusions and references in her productions are borrowed from these sources and they work as the salient feature of theatricality. Dream-like scenes and intuitional outpourings are the other characteristics of theatricality that we observe in her work. Playfulness and role-playing are those spectacular techniques that play their rich role in the generation of staginess.

Laurent [Lepaludier \(2008\)](#) composed a research article named *Theatricality in the*

Short Story: Staging the Word?. The researcher enumerates several theatrical devices found in short stories. The first of them is referred to the concept of dialogues. Lepaludier here seems to reuse the Bakhtinian theory of dialogism, which states that dialogues are imposed on us from birth to death. Our words are either response to some previous query or a stimulus to the future question. He says, "When the dramatic dimension of some stories supersedes the narrative one, it seems to "aspire to the condition of theatre" (p.2). Pastiche, parody, and allusions in the short story also produce theatrical effects for the reader. These techniques of theatrics bring different perspectives in confrontational mode to let the opposite meaning ooze out of the text. When the story mimics theatre ambience, its narrative aspect subsides, and its flashy dimension is popped up. An illusion of theatrical performance is generated. All the above-reviewed pieces of research are creditable and provide an insight to the present researcher to go for the theatrical analysis of the short plays of Ikram Azam.

Research Questions

The present research is pursued with the help of the following questions.

- What theatrical strategies are used by Azam in *Short Peace Plays*?
- What are the authorial intentions that work behind these distancing devices?

Research Methodology

Theatricality in its new idiom stands for the qualities of a literary text that creates a theatrical scene in the mind of the reader when he/she is perusing it. Wladimir [Krysinski \(1982\)](#) composed an essay named *Changed Textual Signs in Modern Theatricality: Gombrowicz and Handke*, which encouraged many intellectuals to add to this fresh notion of theatricality. One of these researchers is Mohsen Mosilhi A. [Barakat \(2021\)](#), who explains well and exhaustively applies the salient notions of theatricality in his research document called *Theatricality of Edward Bond's Plays*. He gives a set of theatrical strategies that he detected

during his doctoral study on Edward Bond's plays.

Histrionic words and histrionic actions are those provisions of theatricality that can create theatrical effects in any piece of literature. These alienating devices change the words of characters into the bombastic actorly vocabulary. A specific type of affectedness is exhibited to stress the stagy side of the text. Then horseplaying and playfulness are the other techniques that a theatrical mind makes use of in his/her aesthetic writing. Memories, ghosts, supernatural characters, dead bodies, and the concept of Siamese twins are cultivated by some authors to produce some spectacular effects. Dialectics of situations, characters, and episodes provide the author with leverage to dramatize the commonplace material for some sociopolitical gains. The application of all these ploys of theatricality generated far-reaching results and very meaningful implications.

Data Analysis

Mohsen Mosilhi A. [Barakat \(2021\)](#) explains well and exhaustively applies the salient notions of theatricality in *Theatricality of Edward Bond's Plays*. The present research applies these ideals of theatricality to Ikram Azam's four short plays: *The Quaid at the Jinnah Road*, *The Two Voices*, *The Vicious Circle*, and *The Sepulcher*. Dreams, ghosts and spirits, historical figures, sociopolitical realities, naivety, war narratives, the polyphony of various disciplines, histrionic words and actions, and patriotic discourse and didacticism are the common alienating devices used in these plays. His play *The Quaid at the Jinnah Road* dramatizes the checkered political history of Pakistan. It is the recapitulation of the dismal and tantalizing political journey of Pakistan that started in 1947 and consisted of a game of hide and seek between democracy and the military regimes, failure of the political system, widespread corruption, and the dismemberment of Pakistan in 1947. Ikram makes use of the different techniques of theatricality to communicate his patriotic message to the reader of this play.

Historical characters like artists are always quite suitable for the generation of the theatrical in literature. In the play under analysis, Jinnah, the creator of Pakistan, Miss Jinnah, the sister of Jinnah, and Liaquat Ali Khan, the close companion of Jinnah and the first prime minister of Pakistan, who passed away years ago, suddenly appear in 'a deserted ghost town' where 'deathlike lull dominates the atmosphere'. Jinnah and Miss Jinnah, Fatima, are reminiscent of 'Christ (crucified) and Buddha (in meditation)'. Seeing destruction and chaos all around, Jinnah asks a naïve question of her sister: 'is this the day that we were waiting for?'. Fatima replies that the Pakistanis, after the death of their founders, were quite free to dismember the country, shatter the national unity, and to kill each other mercilessly. She says, 'They have broken our hearts. This volley of arguments based on social facts adds richly to the theatrical aspect of the play. This artistic ploy is very helpful in communicating the political message of the writer to the audience so that they may think over their past misdeeds.

To the worried and upset Jinnah, the father of the Pakistani nation, Liaquat and Miss Jinnah disclose the discourse that has been very popular in Pakistan about the map of the country. Liaquat, who was killed by the enemies of Pakistan, tells Jinnah that Fatima was cruelly and unjustly cornered from politics by a military dictator. He further says that the unintelligent intellectuals of the country call their founders as 'visionary' and 'dreamers' who had no sense of practical life. He says that they called the two wings of Pakistan, East Pakistan and West Pakistan, 'a geographical monster' as there was a distance of one thousand miles between these two parts of the country. Can a country with such a type of map, survive? Further, Liaquat tells Jinnah that the dismemberment of Pakistan in 1972 was the result of the nefarious designs of India, Indira Gandhi's eternal enmity against Pakistan, and the intrigues of the West. Miss Jinnah has her own point of view in this regard. She says that the main responsibility for the breakup of the country lies on the shoulders of the people of West Pakistan as they did not treat the East Pakistanis like brothers. They were 'better Pakistanis: and are better Muslims'. They have been 'driven by

desperation over the years to separatism.' It appears that there is some case being heard in some court of justice. The advocates of the conflicting parties are presenting their arguments with full force to defeat the opponent. The courtrooms are a very significant theatrical technique to produce the spectacular discourse. It not only makes the play text stagy, it also very shrewdly exposes the sociopolitical issues that have been bitterly taxing the country.

When the disheartening discussion on the bad state of the affairs of the country reaches the highest point, the tone and tenor of the founder of Pakistan assumes a sea change. Like a judge of the court, Jinnah delivers his verdict. He spiritually summons the 'the collective subconscious, 'sub-conscious,' and 'the nation's conscience' and resultantly, the 'ashamed, apologetic' human 'starlets'- a General, a Marshal, and a politician - enter 'the realm of the spirits'. He meets a General and says, 'You had great ambitions for the nation! I had high hopes in you!'. When the General replies, 'I will do my best, the Quaid advises him 'to move in the right direction-and not fritter away...energy and waste time in useless pursuits. Then he turns to the Marshal and advises him to 'keep it up. 'Truth takes a heavy toll,' but the Marshal and his cause should go on in the direction that is 'all quite right'. In his advice to the politician, Jinnah asks the young politician to 'learn to prick your own bubbles! - Don't stray. Stick to my path. Watch your steps' as 'you are young, bright, ambitious, and energetic. The Quaid pardons all the mistakes, blunders, and self-killing activities of the Pakistani nationals by saying, 'we are aware of all the 'betrayals and tragedies'. He very kindly instructs his nation to revise the lessons he gave them. Justice, fair play, love for the nation and fellow human beings, faith, discipline, equality, peace, and brotherhood are all stressed by Jinnah. He says, 'your future and destiny are in your own hands. His prayers read thus: 'May God be with you in your dedicated task of national integration, survival, reconstruction, and consolidation'. The spirits' atmosphere, the march of human characters in this environment, and the address of the father of the nation to the conscious and conscience of the nation very sharply theatricalize Ikram

Azam's play *The Quaid on Jinnah Road*. Two purposes are achieved here, through this application of theatricality: the concerned nationals are encouraged to bury their past fatally erroneous life and to orient themselves to the constructive and linear direction of life. And it is possible only through the slogans of Jinnah, i.e., unity, faith, and discipline.

Ikram Azam's short peace play *The Two Voices* is a postwar narrative in which two characters, Mother and Son, theatrically discuss the dynamics of a war that has devoured all the things around, including the physical environment where houses are pitilessly razed to the ground. The stage directions themselves vehemently provoke the spectacle of staginess for the reader. 'Deaths, 'destruction', 'nothingness', and 'desolation', reign supreme over the entire panorama of bombarded houses, razed colonies, and decaying corpses. Even 'the evening' is 'hesitant to advance, and the birds and night creatures' are 'afraid to venture out. Mother is petrified, and Son is thoroughly scared; 'both are in tatters, and look emaciated, famished'. The play starts with the temporary end of a bloody war. The mother consoles her son by saying 'Don't worry! You have nothing to be scared of any longer!'. Son raises so many questions in the exchange of dialogues with his mother. All these questions are a very useful technique for creating an impression of staginess. He asks his mother, 'won't the planes come again?'. He inquisitively and pressingly again asks 'why not' the planes would not visit them. He again raises a question, 'what is war? What is peace?'. This simpleton question leads to so many dimensions of war and peace. Mother's assertion that 'when two countries fight each other, they are said to be at war' leads to Son's next question: 'when my friends and I fought, we never used guns, tanks, planes and bombs. Fighting is different. Friends fight'. He fought with his friends, but no one was injured or hated by each other as the children fought for love for each other. He further asks what 'hate' is as he is not aware of it.

When Mother says that hate is the opposite of love, he searchingly looks at the destruction around and asks quizzically whether they are in peace or hate. This

satirical and ridiculously humorous episode creates a dramatic sensation for the reader. To Son's simplistic query how peace is different from war, Mother states that in peace, everyone is comforted and helped by each other. He further asks 'where is everybody' if peace is around. Mother has to contradict her own statement when she tells Son that his dear and near ones are no more available in the world as they have 'gone to God's country. To Heaven'. If they have gone to God's country, then why they are lying around is the next immature question of the Son. He asks, 'why don't they speak or move about?' These above mentioned simplistic and unsophisticated questions create a spectacular scene for the reader. The reader is tempted to be the spectator imaginatively while studying this play text. There is a series of naive questions that is embedded in *The Two Voice* to contribute to the theatric side of the play. To Son's childish question, 'Why does God kill them? Because He loves them?', Mother replies, 'it is man who kills a man. not God'. 'Then I would not become a man', is a theatrical protest against the adults of the society who commence war like activities in the world. Mother at last convinces her child to be optimistic about life as it depends upon the options and choices of man to be good or bad in life. She hopes to have the new generation infused with a humanistic spirit. These sons and daughters, she hopes, one day would be good, kind and helpful to the surrounding. Only then there will be plenty of love, friendship, peace, and freedom on the earth. The boy swears to pursue this agenda of humanity in his adult life.

Futurism, or a futuristic approach to life, is the most important salient feature of Ikram Azam's plays, poems, novels, and paintings. His entire oeuvre is an effort to advise and instigate the reader to actualize peace, love, friendship, and prosperity in the world. His peace plays ask the reader to take into account the sociopolitical history of Pakistan: to change themselves for the better conditions of life. He wants to see the complete transformation of the conscious, unconscious, and conscience of the nation. Like Mao Zedong, he asks his nation to depend upon its own arms. Ikram Azam's bulging out futuristic orientation, patriotism,

and the presentation of characters who gird up their loins to spend every ounce of their life, energies to strengthen the theme of nationhood and humanity. Sometimes, an impression is created, especially in his plays, that the writer first chooses the theme and then goes for the formal structures/skeleton. It is also observed that the asides are richly housed in the theatrical material.

Ikram Azam's *The Sepulcher* is an absurdist play that reminds us of the Beckettian tradition of drama. Like other plays of this genre, the present dialogic writing is also not given to the idea of action; it badly lacks in any type of movement; it is the other version of "nothing to be done" (Beckett, 2011, p.3). But in spite of all these flaws, the play is tucked with the significant alienating techniques that the writer employs cleverly to communicate the intended messages to the targeted reader. Symbols, metaphors, satire, analogies, dialectics, and analogies are the salient provisions of his dramaturgy. These estrangement ploys expose the rusty ideologies of life like escapism, lack of hard work, inefficiency, utter materialism, and rigid conformism to the stale systems of life.

Painting, sculpture, and the dead bodies, like memories and supernatural elements, are quite suitable instruments for theatricalizing a piece of literature (Lepaludier, 2008). Here the lexeme sepulcher, which stands for the container of a dead body, is the title plus theme of the play. As a figure of speech, it stands for the barren, meaningless, joyless, and worthless. The settings of *The Sepulcher* deal with its theatrics. It reads thus: 'Almost a 'dumb-show' about living in the well of the Past-turned Present fouling the Future'. The characters of the play are voices: First Voice and Second Voice. Their house is 'partly lived in. A portion closed down. Looks almost haunted. Half-Lit. Gloomy'. This locale is symbolic of profusely negative imagery. The characters' are voices are themselves shocking and disturbing to the reader; then, the discourse of the play presented as dumbshow refers to the irrelevance of language, which insists on inaction and passivity. The partly lived-in house that is nearly closed points to the flat, undynamic, and shutoff posture of existence. Living in a well-like place again reflects the semiology of

a hellish life. The voices roam in the space like the calls of some supernatural beings that are shy of form, grace, rhythm, and stability. Like the wind in T. S. Eliot's poetry, these voices add barrenness to the land where "April is the cruelest month" (2010, p.63). Instead of proximity, the reader develops distance from the world of the play under analysis.

Voice First and Voice Second are analogous to each other. They, most of the time, propel alternately the same argument; if A presents a barren image, then B pushes it to the further stage. They continue to complement each other. First Voice says that the 'place is like a well' and this 'deep, dark, and 'dry' is only 'to trap the drowning straws'. Second Voice tells us that the little water at the bottom will never let them 'escape' from there. They are labeled as 'the eternal mourners' who live on with the help of 'memories, memorabilia, and nostalgia'. Death and dead bodies have been used as a theatrical strategy very successfully by writers like Edward Bond to communicate their thematic concerns. Variation in the sense of death gives deep meanings to the text of *The Sepulcher*. First Voice doubts, 'I wonder if we are alive at all. Second Voice produces a self-critical answer, 'O we are! Don't we eat, drink, work, sleep, move...?'. Here automatized life of the characters is presented as death. To visit places, read and write, enjoy, and go to movies and watch TV is a routine with these people. Their routine is to get up early in the morning, wash and change, take breakfast, go to work, come back in the evening, and sleep. A Voice asks, 'Could anything be more dull and insipid?'. T. S. Eliot in his poems, tells us about the breathing dead bodies of the west when he says, "London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down" (p.110). The same is the case here. The characters feel that they have been 'abandoned by everything; everyone. The living and the dead, alike'.

Politics of capitalism versus communism, the dialectical juxtaposition of contrastive characters, dialogic interaction among various disciplines like science, poetry, and philosophy, and the use of histrionic words and actions are the main theatrical devices that Ikram Azam used in his next short peace play *The Vicious Circle*. Like *The Twin Voices*, this play text also aestheticizes the theme of

war and peace. Two types of utopias are dialecticism here. The poet and the scientist use histrionic words to flaunt their success concerning the making of some war weapon. On the other hand, the philosopher rejects their ideology and presents his own theory of pacifism across the tenses and times. He believes that only through love and dedication for all the humans on the globe we can create an ideal world. This dialectical volley of arguments creates a sense of drama for the reader. It is a successful technique to promote universal pacifism instead of a national frenzy.

Conclusion

The present research that was pursued to identify the techniques of theatricality and their artistic goals in Ikram Azam's *Short Peace Plays* produced very far-reaching results. In *The Quaid at the Jinnah Road*, the use of historical figures of Jinnah and Fatima Jinnah, along with Liaqat Ali Khan who appear in a dream-like atmosphere, dramatizes the catastrophic sociopolitical history of Pakistan. Then the intervention of the present-day army officers and politicians to assure the father of the nation to do their best for the all-inclusive progress of the country creates very patriotic effects through the theatrical thrust of the play text. The text of *The Sepulcher* produces a filmic atmosphere; First Voice and the Second Voice are characters who appear in the form of semi-dead bodies. This artistic technique foregrounds the deathlike scenario by shocking the reader; the characters who belong to the Beckettian tradition of absurd drama stick out for their existential performance. A sense of utter pessimism is there, but the estrangement of the theme of death in life renders it fantastic. The tantalizing state of life with these characters pushes the dramatic axis to the alarming heights when we see them unable to crawl even. *The Two Voices*, which deals the other significant technique of theatricality, i.e., war and postwar effects, draws a theatrical contrast between the butchery of animals and the bestiality of humans. Mutilated human bodies are lying all around to make a face at mankind as the 'best' creation on the globe. Animals are comparatively more 'human' than humans. *The Vicious Circle* brings forth

the dialogism of arguments between two groups: a poet and a scientist on one hand and a philosopher on the other hand. The scientist has made a technological discovery for his country and the poet is singing his praise. They believe that their weapon would keep them safe from the attack of the other country, and they would now live in a utopian world of freedoms and joys. But the

antagonistic argument of the philosopher rejects this stance, and he goes for the promotion of love and dedication for all human beings. The utopia of the philosopher, in contrast with the ideal world of the scientist creates a lot of theatrical effects for the reader. This theatrical technique proves very helpful in communicating the authorial message of pacifism via love across the globe.

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