



A probe of myths and anti-hegemonic values in shahid nadeem's plays

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Abstract

The researcher takes the 'Selected Plays' of Shahid Nadeem to probe the myths and anti-hegemonic values in the plays. Shahid Nadeem is a Pakistani playwright who uses the platform of theatre to expose the myths constructed by Bourgeois class in order to maintain their exploitative system. Shahid's plays like 'Bullah, Acquittal, The Third Knock and Black is my Robe' deal with the social issues and Hegemonic value floated by oppressor class. A Granny for all seasons targets the distortion of history, The Third Knock deals with state ideology for power, Bullah addresses the religious dogmas current in the society. The bourgeois class generates ideology to control the minds of the masses. Shahid's plays show that our society is a class-based system. Nadeem's efforts to expose and challenges the system through anti-hegemonic discourse and myths are exposed by Shahid Nadeem's social plays.

Keywords: myths, anti-hegemonic discourse, ideology, Antonio Gramsci, Roland Barthes, Bourgeois class

Introduction

Terry Eagleton in his book, *Ideology: An Introduction* says,

"Culture for both [Gramsci and Freud] is an amalgam of coercive and consensual mechanisms for reconciling human subjects to their unwelcome fate as laboring animals in oppressive conditions." (179-180.)

Shahid uses three strategies in his plays to break the hegemony of the culturally powerful class: they are counter-hegemonic discourse; metaphors and symbols, and music and dance. Steve Jones in his book *Antonio Gramsci* says, "Commonly, the word "domination" denotes subjugation or the exercise of absolute control either by a state or by an individual, on the other hand, hegemony conveys such notions as influence, patronage or leadership" (18). The Italian social theorist, Antonio Gramsci uses the two terms to analyze the structure of power of the state. For him, the cohesion of such state springs from the spiritual and cultural supremacy it exercises through the manipulation of civil society. By using socializing mechanisms such as religion, schools, the press, and other non-governmental institutions, the state imposes its own values and beliefs on society, thereby providing cultural direction. Its hegemony in this sense becomes a rule by consent. What happens in the play *Black is my Robe* is that a village Pir owns the well which is the only source of water for the village people. Pir sells the water on his desired price and controls society through his spiritual dominance and economic control. He exploits the public through his myths and fake ideologies.

During General Zia's regime, the state tried to rule by coercion. Zia passed discriminatory laws to suppress the public. *Barri* was written in 1987 in the context of General Zia's Hudood Ordinance^[1], discriminatory Islamic laws that were used to punish women and caused gross miscarriages of justice. The play revolves around a middle-class activist, Zahida Zaman, who is arrested for going on a hunger strike in protest against the family laws. She is placed in a cell that already contains three other women, JannatBibi, Jamila, and Mariam. Throughout the course of the play, the audience learns the stories of each of these women. JannatBibi is in prison for a crime that her son is supposed to have committed. Jamila has been convicted of murdering her husband while Mariam has been imprisoned on charges of dancing in public. Jamila tells the audience that she was married at 14 to a man who was almost as old as her father. She fell in love with a younger man and asked her husband for a divorce but he refused and physically abused her. She managed to run away with her lover but was caught and returned to her husband's house where she was chained to the bed. When her husband thought that she had accepted defeat, he untied the ropes. That night, Jamila killed her husband with an axe. Because he would not grant her divorce, the only way for her to save herself from a loveless and abusive marriage was to kill her

¹THE HUDOOD ORDINANCES, are laws in Pakistan that were enacted in 1979 as part of the military ruler Zia-ul-Haq's Islamisation process. It replaced parts of the secular, British-era Pakistan Penal code, adding new criminal offences of adultery and fornication and new punishments of whipping, amputation, and stoning to death. After much controversy and criticism parts of the law were extensively revised in 2006 by the Women's Protection Bill.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hudood_Ordinances

husband. In Mariam's case, she was imprisoned on charges of dancing in public and was given a three-month sentence. However, at the time the play takes place, those three months are long over and Mariam is still in jail. In addition, she is pregnant. When Zahida expresses surprise at Mariam's pregnancy, Mariam has been repeatedly raped by many of the prison officers and the child could be anyone. The prison officers tried to force Mariam to get an abortion, but she refused. Finally, Mariam is subjected to a forcible abortion, under the guise of a medical checkup. By the time Zahida returns home from jail, she has learned about the many injustices that are visited upon women. She also realizes that while, in theory, prisoners have legal rights, but unfortunately no such rights exist in a practical world.

Statement of the Problem

It is a common concept that everything around us is a natural phenomenon. Everything is happening in society is according to natural laws. But the plays of Shahid Nadeem expose that we are surrounded by constructed realities. Few people are holding power and to maintain their power structure they have been producing myths to get consent for their illegitimate rule.

Research Question

1. How Shahid Nadeem exposes through his plays, the Myths constructed by Bourgeoisie class to maintain their Hegemony?

Theoretical Framework

Gramsci argues that the power of the ruling class is not just limited to the economic base. It also manifests itself in the hegemony exercised from the superstructure^[2], i.e., from the spiritual, ideological and cultural spheres that provide myth, consolidation, and legitimacy to a given regime. He contends that the values, beliefs, consumption patterns and habits of thought of the ruling class do penetrate the proletariat. They rub-off on the population, distort their vision and negatively affect their perception. Shahid Nadeem in his play *Burqavaganza* shows how the perception of the masses has been distorted by the tribal mindset of the fundamentalists. In a comic way, he raises a question against dominant ideologies in order to generate awareness for the audience. Like *Bulha*, *Burqavaganza* concerns the increasing Islamization of society. Written in 2007, in the context of the Laal Masjid episode and the moral policing of the female students of Jamia Hafsa, the play is a farce that uses songs and

² Base and Superstructure are two linked theoretical concepts developed by Karl Marx. Base refers to the forces and relations of production to all the people, relationships between them, the role that they play, and the materials and resources involved in producing the things needed by society. Superstructure, quite simply and expansively, refers to all other aspects of society. It includes culture, ideology (world views, ideas, values, and beliefs), norms and expectations, identities that people inhabit, social institutions (education, religion, media, and family, among others), the political structure, and the state (the political apparatus that governs society). Marx argued that the superstructure grows out of the base, and reflects the interest of the ruling class that controls the base. As such, it justifies how the base operates, and the power of the ruling class. <http://sociology.about.com/od/Key-Theoretical-Concepts/fl/Base-and-Superstructure.htm>

humorous situations to highlight contradictions in society. Because the play treats the issue of the holy burqa in a comedic manner, it was banned by Pakistan's National Assembly for being disrespectful to Islam. In the play, everyone, both men and women, wears a burqa and carries out all the normal activities. For example, people are shown exercising in burqas. It also satirizes religious talk shows where fundamentalists give rulings on important issues such as whether women can wear nets with their burqas. There is also a character based on Osama bin Laden called Burqa bin Batin. Finally, the play is sprinkled with parodies of well-known Bollywood songs. By showing a character engaging in all activities while wearing the burqa, the play makes the point that wearing or not wearing the garment has no impact on people's behavior.

Gramsci reasons that the task of human liberation cannot simply be considered inevitable, just because there is a crisis in the system. The population can easily be manipulated. The lack of critical consciousness cannot be lightly viewed. Under such circumstances, people can hardly be expected to question their conditions and still less to reject the values of the ruling class. And no matter how abject their living conditions, they will not think of revolution. If fundamental change is, therefore, to take place in society, Gramsci maintains that revolutionary seeds would have to be planted in a cultural soil that is prepared to accept them.

Textual Analysis

The hegemony of the ruling class, i.e., the spiritual and cultural supremacy that it exercises by manipulating civil society, would have to be countered. Shahid Nadeem does this by his activist plays. In *The Third Knock* Mansoor proposes:

“You keep on ‘iffing’ and ‘butting’, and they will eat you alive. You keep thinking of an uncertain tomorrow and they are coming to destroy you today. (Too Old Man) you say we should plead with him, that we should beg for mercy. You are mistaken. He is not going to be appeased by begging and pleading, he wants money, more and more money. (To Ejaz) Do you think we can get some relief from the law? Wrong again. They know the law much better than us, it is their law. (To Zulfi) And you think, if we raise the rent, we can stay on? You are very wrong. An increase in the rent is not going to satisfy his greed. Whatever increase we manage, it will be nothing compared to the profit he will earn from the hotel!” (Nadeem 23).

Gramsci says that more attention should be given to the revolutionary organization in the realm of culture and education. Discussion and counter-discourse should be raised to enhance the consciousness of the subcultural down-trodden class to help promote their solidarity, to restrict the decision-making capacity of the ruling class and eventually to take over the administrative functions of the country.

To create awareness among the masses, it is necessary to generate the alternative ideology that challenges the existing natural thinking. Shahid produces a play named, *Bulha* to

present the alternative ideology of Islam against the fundamentalist, extremist and tribal version of Islam. The play revolves around the disagreements between the fundamentalists and their orthodox interpretations of Islam and Bulha Shah's Sufism. The play opens after Bulha's death when the Qazi (head of the Islamic court) refuses to allow the body to be buried in the city graveyard until it is determined if he is entitled to a Muslim burial. It then proceeds in the flashback to show Bulha's life and his struggle with the Fundamentalists. During his lifetime, the saint was accused of heresy and exiled from his city. After his death, the religious authorities refused to lead his funeral prayer or to bury him in the city's graveyard. Through the struggle between Bulha Shah and the orthodox representatives of Islam, Nadeem comments on contemporary tensions between liberal and fundamentalist versions of Islam.

Gramsci says that all intellectuals are not playing their active role in the betterment of society. Gramsci distinguishes between two types of intellectuals, the "organic intellectual and the traditional intellectual" ^[3] (Gramsci 10). The organic intellectuals are entrepreneurial in character, reproduce and transmit particular conceptions of the world. According to Gramsci, the history of a new social class is always accompanied by what he defines as the organic intellectual. Gramsci is concerned here with the organic intellectuals' ability to lead the emerging class and help to maintain its dominance.

"It leads the classes which are its allies and dominates those which are its enemies. Therefore, even before attaining power a class can lead; when it is in power it becomes dominant, but continues to lead as well...there can and must be a political hegemony even before the attainment of governmental power, and one would not count solely on the power and material force which such a position gives in order to exercise political leadership or hegemony" (Gramsci 57).

The traditional intellectual, on the other hand, does not exercise any political functions over the masses. The traditional intellectual has pre-existent structural ties to the dominant group; they are essentially the social glue, which

³ Antonio Gramsci distinguishes between 'traditional and organic intellectuals'. "Traditional intellectuals are thought to be disinterested and to rise in the name of reason and truth above sectarian or topical interests. Organic intellectuals on the other hand, speak for the interest of a specific class. Moreover, traditional intellectuals are bound to the institutions of the previous hegemonic order while organic intellectuals seek to win consent to counter-hegemonic ideas and ambitions. Gramsci is interested in the formation of intellectuals who will be organic to the interests of the working class (and who therefore find their place within the revolutionary party). If traditional intellectuals are thought to be in fact interested on behalf of a class, then the distinction as framed disappears and intellectuals of both types can be seen as the rival representatives (the mobilizers, internal critic) of sectional interests in a class society".

<http://faculty.washington.edu/cbebler/glossary/intellect.html>

holds together the ideological world view of the dominant class with the common sense of the subordinate class. Traditional intellectuals once tied to the dominant groups of history, for Gramsci, have evolved into a "crystallized social group, one that which sees itself continuing uninterrupted through history and thus independent of the struggle of groups" (Gramsci 452). Thus, an essential task for the revolutionary party is to reverse the ideology of the traditional intellectual by assimilating them with the ideology of the emerging group.

"Thus there are historically formed specialized categories for the exercise of intellectual function. They are formed in connection with all social groups, especially in connection with the more important, and they undergo more important and complex elaboration in connection with the dominant social group. One of the most important characteristics of any group that is developing towards dominance is its struggle to assimilate and conquer "ideologically" the traditional intellectuals, but this assimilation and conquest is quicker and more efficacious the more the group in question succeeds in simultaneously elaborating its own organic intellectual" (Gramsci 10).

Shahid Nadeem is, therefore, an organic intellectual, who is striving for the suppressed classes and continuously struggling against hegemonic ideologies through his writings. Opra in the play *Black is my Robe* is an intellectual in the society while Pir is exploiter. Opra as an intellectual figure who is trying to awake the masses about the injustices which are obvious in his conversation with Sundri:

Sundri: If you know everything, then tell me who killed the ox?

Opra: The Pir did that.

Sundri: That is a lie; PirSaeen is the patron of the village.

Opra: Not the patron but the plunderer. Tell me, have you ever benefited from his blessings? You never got the child in spite of all the blessings.

Sundri: That was my misfortune.

Opra: That is the point. If he fails, you blame yourself, if something happens, you credit him" (Nadeem166).

Nadeem is playing a vital role in awakening the masses against the injustice and so-called democratic governments where the basic human laws are suspended; there he is trying to liberate the masses from the clutches of few wealthy and cunning elite. In his play, *Teesri Tastak* Shahid Nadeem metaphorically says that unless the commoners become united and vigil their liberation from these lords and Hajis is not easily possible. Common and crushed people have to be a vigil in order to break the hegemony

Conclusion

Shahid Nadeem in his plays shows that the ruling class not only uses coercive power to pressurize the masses but also

uses hegemony to maintain their structure. The exploitation of culture is central to any discussion of hegemony. They make things natural and forms the myths to consolidate their ideology and power in society. Barthes is concerned to analyze the myths circulating in contemporary society, the false representations and erroneous beliefs current in the France of the postwar period. *Mythologies* is a work about the myths that circulate in everyday life which construct a world for us and our place in it.

We inhabit a world of signs which support existing power structures and which is taken by the masses to be natural. The role of the mythologist, as Barthes sees it, is to expose these signs as the artificial constructs that they are to reveal their workings and show what appears to be natural are in fact determined by history. This is certainly how Barthes sees the role of the criticism in general in the autobiographical. It is possible to argue that 'myth', as Barthes uses it in *Mythologies*, functions as a synonym of ideology. As a theoretical construct ideology is particularly hard to define. However one of the most pervasive definitions of the term holds that it refers to the body of beliefs and representations that sustain and legitimate current power relationships. Ideology⁴ promotes the values and interests of dominant groups within society. Terry Eagleton comes up within his book *Ideology: An Introduction*:

“A dominant power may legitimate itself by promoting beliefs and values congenial to it; naturalizing and universalizing such beliefs so as to render them self-evident and apparently inevitable; denigrating ideas which might challenge it; excluding rival forms of thought, perhaps by some unspoken but systematic logic; and obscuring social reality in ways convenient to itself. Such 'mystification', as it is commonly known, frequently takes the form of masking or suppressing social conflicts, from which arises the conception of ideology as an imaginary resolution of real contradictions” (56).

Ideology functions, in other words, to naturalize what is in fact humanly constructed. Humans have long used the adjective natural to justify their own fabrications. By myths, Barthes intends all the interpretations (these may take several forms: narratives, pictures, etc.) which humans in general and

⁴Today's understanding of the term Ideology is rooted in the writings of German philosophers Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. They defined Ideology as “The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas... The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production” (The German Ideology). The entirety or the system of ideas of the ruling class would be the Ideology of a given society. The function of ideology would be the continual reproduction of the means of production and thereby to ensure the continuous dominance of the ruling class. Ideology achieves this by distorting reality. While in fact that split in ruling and subservient social classes is artificial and serves the needs of the economic system, the ideas of Ideology makes it appear natural. It makes the subordinate classes accept a state of alienation against they would otherwise revolt.

<https://faculty.washington.edu/mlg/courses/definitions/Ideology.html>

the bourgeoisie, in particular, impose upon events that are in and of themselves neutral in an effort to bolster their own social dominance. Shahid Nadeem generated counter-discourse about the fabricated ideology of hate which has been using to create a breach between Pakistan and India, which are actually culturally united countries. *Granny for All seasons* is unique in this respect, which shows metaphorically the story of two nations. Our establishment has concocted an ideology that propagates that Pakistani culture is quite different from Indian culture. Music, songs, and dancing are banned here; the syllabi were revised to distort history to prove their mythical ideological notion. We suffered the consequences of this brainwashing when we lack artists and the value of art in our culturally deteriorating society. Nadeem sums up the discussion in his play *A Granny for all Season*, when Nani says, “This subject must be difficult because rewriting history is not easy” (Nadeem 100).

This specific definition of the mechanisms of ideology is particularly pertinent to *Mythologies*. Both Eagleton's definition of ideology and Barthes's understanding of myth is the notion of a socially constructed reality, which is passed off as 'natural'. The opinions and values of a specific social class are held up as universal truths.

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