



## RESEARCH PAPER

### A Dialectical Study of Shahid Nadeem's Play *Lo Phir Basant Aai*

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<b>PAPER INFO</b>	<b>ABSTRACT</b>
<b>Received:</b> July 23, 2021	The present study aims at analysing the Ajoka theatre production <i>Lo Phir Basant Aai</i> in the light of Brechtian theory of dialectics. Basant has been a centuries old festival of Lahore that celebrates arrival of the spring season. Kite flying is a main part of this seasonal festivity. The local fanatic elements start violent attacks against kite flying and the other related fine arts. This dialectical conflict between Basant and fanaticism goes on many levels and in many forms. The dialectical play text composed by Nadeem is self-referential in character. It engages the audience effectively by awakening their rational faculties. The audience/readers assume the role of a judge who critically listens to the dialectical views of both the lawyers and then decides the case in favor of the positive discourse. This alternative theatrical production grips the attention of the audience to support the Basant festival that guarantees the continuity of secular, plural and dynamic social formation of the society.
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## Introduction

Shahid Nadeem, a Pakistani contemporary playwright, bears political aesthetics. Ajoka, a theatre of the protest, does mainly depend on his self-referential play texts. He chooses his playwriting generally from the burning sociopolitical issues of the present-day speech community of Pakistan. The current ailments are kneaded with his artistic self-critical sensibility so that the rational faculties of the audience are well shaken. Since the last decades of the previous century, his artistic "resistance.... carries on" (Ishtiaq, 2015, para. 1). He not only pinpoints the unacceptable butcheries that the frozen social structures are practicing on the downtrodden junta of the Pakistani society, he also, like Seamus Heaney, does not shy from whipping the

complacent criminality of the people who do not show any potent reaction against the imperialistic ideologies. For example, Banerjee (2015) says that Nadeem's under discussion play *Lo Phir Basant Aai* "laments the ordinary folk of Pakistan who are unable to protect their identity, culture and values" (para.1). Nadeem's poetics is an off shoot of Brechtian aesthetics. Like so many writers of the second part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and those of the 21<sup>st</sup> century he works under the cardinal features of the epic theatre of Brecht. Owing to the cultural and temporal differences, most of the time he goes for the customization of the Brechtian dramaturgy. Besides the Brechtian distancing devices, naivety, political comedy and 'quotational' playwriting, he makes use of the theory of dialectics that Brecht borrowed from Karl Marx and Engels to achieve his ideological literary mission.

Since the late 1970s when Russia attacked Afghanistan, the country has been a bed of terroristic activities and the bulging out fanatic mindset that is even today going on to impose the philistine ideology on the neighboring States especially Pakistan. One of the huge harms imparted to the culture of Pakistan is the imposition of ban by the provincial government on kite flying in the first decade of the current century. The excuse for the ban was the injuries to the public by the metallic and glass quoted string used for kite flying. The fanatic and zealot elements of the society, under the influence of the Taliban way of life, started to profane the festival of kite flying in Lahore exclusively. A campaign was started to ally the Basant festivity with the basic tenets of the Hindu religion. Then some zealots announced that this cultural festival was started by Haqeeqat Rao whose enmity to Islam and especially the prophet of Islam was quite explicit. To this vicious and severe frantic program, Aman Ullah Khan Arman's book (1959) *Urs aur Melay* (Shrine Festivals and Fairs) can be presented as a rebuttal. This seminal book on the topic of Basant unveils some basic realities with far reaching effects and results. He says: "Basant is a seasonal festival of Indo-Pak sub-continent and it has no religious bearings ... Basant is regarded the herald of spring, wheat grows, and mustard blossoms in this season" (pp. 276-277).

Cultural festivities and social celebrations mostly spring from the indigenous roots that with the passage of time continue to produce various panoramic vistas for the aesthetic needs of the people. Hajira Saleem (2018) in her essay *Basant: Each Day is a Festival Day* goes after the historical developments of the festival of Basant in the subcontinent. She elaborates it with reference to its seasonal and genealogical character. When winter starts to wrap up its fold, the heralding nature of the spring begins to actualize itself. Spring signifies the regenerative aspect of nature and human life both. The deadness of relations and lifelessness of natural settings is supposed to be replaced by freshness and wellbeing of the new breath of life cycle: "Basant is like a wakeup call to get up and live life once again and experience everything" (para 9). She traces the support that Basant got at the hands of the ruling structures in the past. Maharaja Ranjit Sing patronized Basant to such an extent that it turned into the unavoidable feature of the Laborite culture especially. He and his favorite queen Moran would get beautiful yellow dresses designed for taking part in the seasonal festival. All the day long different types of dishes were prepared and the Lahorites enjoyed the occasion to the fullest point. Here there is a point to notice: Basant was not

the exclusive festivity of the Muslims; it was a secular celebration open for all; to be enjoyed by all the elements of culture irrespective of their age, sex, ethnicity and religion. The pluralistic, flexible, and dynamic nature of the society was metaphorized through this cultural celebration.

Majid Sheikh (2018) in his writing *Basant Means Happiness* does diagnostically investigate the spring festival that is celebrated in Lahore and the other cities of Punjab. He says that this spring festival, as a renewal of life, is celebrated throughout the world to welcome the flowering season once again in life. He goes a step forward than Hajira Saleem in his investigation on the origin and development of this festivity. His insistence on the festival as a secular celebration is a significant response to the allegations of the religious extremists. According to his contention, Mahmud Ghaznavid, the central Asian invader to India, was irresistibly attracted to this seasonal festival, during his stay in Lahore. Then Ranjit Singh announced ten days holiday on this occasion and his "soldiers wore bright yellow costumes to compete at dancing and kite-flying, not to speak of other delightful pastimes" (para.2). Sheikh also keeps Basant in the context of the present day and says "Our values and traditions matter" as they are bound to promote "a positive image about Pakistan, which is a much-needed .... in a country with an ugly image of terrorism" (para.9). In the last portion of this article, he urges the government to lift the ban on kite flying. To stop the cruel effects of Basant, he also recommends some measures; for example, to fine them heavily who prepare metallic and glass coated string and to earmark a particular area for the Basant festivities.

UK Essays in its edition, *Basant: A Lost Festival of Lahore* (2017) composed a very creative and critical essay. The angles that it covers are so many. The thrust of the article is on the all-inclusive character of Basant: all the residents of Lahore belonging to cross-religious sections of the society like Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims etc. did participate in this old tradition of Basant. It holds that "there are no barriers of faiths or different socio-economic category" in the celebrations of Basant. This is "an event that would distribute felicity ubiquitously" (para. 1-3). Many an interview make the data of this article that cover the economic, social, political and traditional aspects of Basant. Basant was an industry that was generating a lot of economic activity in the city. In the Basant season, flocks of Muslim and Non-Muslim tourists from all over the globe used to rush to Lahore to participate in the festival. Organizations and companies came into existence to manage the stay, food and entertainment of the guests who came from outside of Pakistan. Singers, actors and celebrities of local, national and international levels took part in different cultural shows arranged by the managers of the Basant festival.

Of course, all the above reviewed literature added new and fresh pieces of information on the topic of Basant. From the origin and development of Basant to the present-day hard restrictions applied by the current governments on kite flying, every aspect is covered by these pieces of research. Shahid Nadeem in his play *Lo Phir Basant Aai* adds a new dimension to the Basant festival. It presents the festivity in the

background of those forces that continue to act and react against each other on ideological and political levels. This play on Basant tells us about those forces that turned the dynamic local culture into an inertia-stricken society; the implications of this debacle are foregrounded strategically. Bertolt Brecht's theories on dialectics did inform this study.

### **Theoretical Framework**

*Bertolt Brecht on Theatre: Development of an Aesthetic* (1984) by Bertolt Brecht is the Bible for the political drama and theatre. Brecht's dramaturgy and theories of political art were, are and will remain a great inspiration for the art dependent on the alternative perspective. Today there are countless writers across the globe who consciously and unconsciously follow his alternative aesthetics. There are so many researchers on drama and theatre in the world who use his artistic theories to pursue their research projects. The present research is also carried out with the cushion of Brechtian poetics. Brecht borrowed his dialectics from Marx who used it in terms of class consciousness. Brecht customized the Marxist dialectics to further his sociopolitical commitment. There are various forms, situations and conditions where he uses his theory of dialectics. Following the traditions of Brechtian dramaturgy, Shahid Nadeem also makes use of episodic plot to let the existing social order expose its irregularities and improbabilities. Sometimes, Nadeem, in his under discussion play *Lo Phir Basant Aai* brings two characters in conflict with each other: they act and react against each other and in this way a discursal opposition comes into action to play its part. While responding to the point of view of the opposing forces, both the discourses debate like the two lawyers attacking each other, in front of a judge. The reader/audience automatically assume the role of the judge to decide the case finally.

Brecht (1984) says, "The parts of the story have to be carefully set off one against another by giving each its own structure as a play within the play" (p. 68). *Lo Phir Basant Aai* by Nadeem was staged by Ajoka theatre of Lahore. The soft cultural product Basant/kite flying in the spring season is juxtaposed with the terroristic and fanatic activities of Talibans. As the powerful storm behaves with the kite flying in the sky, same is done with Basant under the attack of Talibans. No doubt, the upholders of kite flying put their lukewarm resistance but of no avail. In this artistic use of dialectics one purpose is achieved. The audience are awakened to the barbaric agenda of the fanatic elements of the society; they are also acquainted with the usefulness of their own cultural festivities. This play proves a very successful resistance on the artistic level against the bullying hegemonies of fanaticism, commercialism and automatized ideologies.

### **Results and Discussion**

Brecht laid the foundation of an alternative theatre, that was in a sense non-Aristotelian, as it did not pay respect to the niceties of the traditional dramatic theatre and dramaturgy that always insisted on the coherence of the body of the plot. Brecht introduced his epic theatre in Germany in the second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to

pursue his political poetics. Following the divisive contours found in the body of an epic poem, Brecht introduced the epic theatricality; his objective was to put the conflicting discourses in opposition to each other. Leach (2004) says, "Like the segments of a worm, each (scene) is capable of life even when cut off from its neighbor" (p. 117). When the conflicting voices, episodes, situations, humans and ideologies challenge each other with full force, their intrinsic character is exposed. The audience are trapped by the criticality of the dialectics of the play. Consequently, they very minutely observe the difference between the healthy and stale aspects of ideologies in conflict on the stage. And this is the success of the Brechtian aesthetics. Brecht expects the audience to "observe the mechanism of an event like the mechanism of a car" (Feuchtwanger, 1928). Nadeem, the writer of the play under analysis *Lo Phir Basant Aai*, gets inspiration from Brecht.

To create an episodic plot in *Lo Phir Basant Aai*, Nadeem introduces a big set of binaric ideologies that put the politics of dialectics in rhythmic motion. Mauju, an old kite maker, is the custodian of the local cultural values and norms. His kite making for the Basant festival is the metaphor of the original strength of a local vibrant culture to replenish itself with panoramic colors so that its inhabitants remain dynamic and energetic; Sher Khan (2014) says that Mauju of "the play represented the aspirations of the old-city culture and its local aesthetic" (Tribune, para. 7). He is determined to remain adherent, through kite making, to the local customs and aspirations of the walled city of Lahore. As the practice of his culture is his practical religion therefore, Mauju does not like to leave the profession of kite flying at the demand of his daughter-in-law Zainab. Zainab is desirous to sell out the house and to settle somewhere else in the suburbs of Lahore where there are better prospects of livelihood. The dialectical exchange of dialogues between these two characters does engage the audience to look into the matter seriously. Should we leave our cultural practices for the sake of money matters? Can we live a happy life without the favors of our indigenous culture? These questions grip the attention of the reader and the audience of *Lo Phir Basant Aai*.

Edward Said's theory of postcolonialism does lay specific emphasis on the defense of one's native culture. Their culture is not only their identity, it is also the basis of their respectable existence. Only the aggressive defense of their culture can guarantee/earn independence for them. It is their onus responsibility "to assert their own identity and the existence of their own history" as "nations themselves *are* narrations" (Said, 1993, pp-xii-xiii). This Saidian formulation seems to provide sap to the stand of Mauju in *Lo Phir Basant Aai*. This man is not only mature in age, he is also mature in consciousness and sensibility. His argument is realistic and sagacious when he says that his profession of kite flying was initiated by their forefathers' hence, he loves it. Here antiquity of the kite flying accounts for the reasonable weight of the traditions. His five generations remained linked with this profession. To elongate this tradition, he is ready even to face financial problems. The other feature of this traditional profession was its communistic way of life. All the members of his father's family cooperated with each other in the process of kite making. The female members

left no stone unturned to prepare delicious foods for the seasonal occasion. Mauju also tells the historic character of kite flying. The father of his grandfather was an official kite maker in the court of Sikh ruler of Lahore i.e. Ranjeet Sing. The Sikh ruler was so fond of Basant that he asked Mauju's ancestors to prepare beautiful kites after the name of his favourite queens: Moran and Billo etc. This weighty argument of Mauju enters into a conflict with the commercial mind of Zainab. She insists on giving up the traditional profession of her family but Mauju wants to cope with it at any cost. The perceptive readers are engaged by the text to vote for the positive argument.

Professor Nasir Mahmood Siddiqui (2018) says "Mauju in *Lo Phir Basant Aai* represents the phenomenon of great self-realization that was not possible in the absence of spontaneous, free, romantic and collectivity based homegrown culture" (personal communication, 2018). Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) says that every culture has its own self-regulatory mechanism. It automatically absorbs, sometimes, the items from other cultures that turn into its essential demand. It also comes into its operative reactive mode, when some 'virus' attacks it. Mauju's strict drag over kite flying and his stance against encroaching agencies like religious extremism and commercialism has vital signification. He signifies the resistance, sap, rhythm and vitals of a culture that keep it alive. Basant is guardian of so many beauties. It keeps the local culture open; it resists 'closedness' that equates with narrowmindedness. It also brings all the elements in close contact with each other to keep tolerance among various religions, races, castes, classes and ethnicities go on. Sarwat Ali (2014) says that the play under discussion is written "in the manner of a polemical exchange between various set of characters, brought out tensions embedded in our society -- with basant becoming a symbolic reference to a whole lot of divergent points of view that have gone into the unruffled mix that Pakistani society has become" (para. 2).

Zehra Nabi (2014) says that Nadeem's "plays are not meant to simply entertain but also to make the audience think" (para. 3). To charge the audience rationally has always been the mission of all the political playwrights. They drag their political consciousness to the public mind to involve them in the probe of some existing issue. To achieve this objective, the technique that is mostly used is called dialectics. Dialectical mode of playwriting and production metaphorize the two opposing lawyers in front of a judge. The belligerent actions of the lawyers against each other not only thrash the matter very well, it also irresistibly grips the attention and mind of the audience. Dialectical confrontations take so many forms: metaphors, historical periods and social institutions, in the play *Lo Phir Basant Aai*. The offensive actions of the Taliban oriented Islamists are desirous to buy the house of Mauju that is the symbol of the site of love and liberalism. The old kite maker is unable to put a successful rebuttal, but the dialectical art of Nadeem and Ajoka support his cause well. Resultantly, the audience feel persuaded to ally with him in the preservation of the dynamic culture.

There are manifold tussles between the conflicting ideologies. Basant is a naturally grown festival of Lahore. It came into existence in the background of

diversity of religions like Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, Christianity etc. on the one hand and divergent ethnicities and races on the other hand. The pluralistic societies continue to strike the common grounds for the easy, meaningful and playful life. These common festivities depress the negatives and elevate the positives of diversities. Basant has been since centuries the metaphor of dynamic cohesion and social ease for all the pluralistic sections. It is a festival by choice. No one imposed it on Lahore. On the other hand, the extremists want to impose their fanatic religiosity on the present-day Lahore by force. They are trying to colonize the city ideologically. The role of the State is also dubious: it does not come into action against the enemies of Basant; rather it supports their cause by putting a ban on this cultural entertainment. "We created a country without any roots in the ground and our Land of the Pure is still in the air, going haywire with the flow of the wind" (Anonymous, para. 2). Should the State remain silent in this type of situation? Shouldn't we support the cause of Mauju? Such type of creative questions jump to the attention of the audience while watching the play under analysis on the stage.

The colonizer always maintains its weapon called panoptic surveillance on the objectified and colonized people. Same is the case of the totalizing ideologies of the puritanical elements in *Lo Phir Basant Aai*. The fellow arts of kite flying like singing, romantic poetry and painting are also put under strict restrictions. The college teacher is prevented from teaching romantic poets like Ghalib and Faiz in the class. He is asked to teach only the stories of traditional Islamic traditions to the young ones as only Islam is the 'best' material for teaching. When Kami, the lover, shows his desire to become a singer, his beloved, Rubi, expresses her desire to become a painter. Their ambitions not only bring them close to each other, they are also provided with ideal processes and patterns of socialization to produce a playful personality. These fine arts, along with other artistic expressions, turn a culture into a reasonable, enviable and pleasant atmosphere that essentially contributes to the dynamically constituted cultural colors. The sweet and agreed upon cultural colors not only attract the individuals to ideologically constitute them, they also play their role to minimize the ethnic, religious, racial and regional divisions and biases. Such type of open and recreational character is unacceptable to the myopic extremists. That is why the talbanistic ideology comes out with its naked teeth to bully Basant and other cultural niceties linked with it. Should these sweet cultural flavors be allowed to be replaced by the puritanical ideology? Such type of question crosses the mind of the audience watching *Lo Phir Basant Aai* on the stage.

Like Brecht and Edward Bond, Nadeem is also fond of featuring oppositional discourses and situations in antithetical frames in his plays. Mauju sometimes goes to the basement of his house to have a chat with big kites that never see the sunshine. His attitude is friendly and patronizing to them. During his conversation with hidden kites, we get an impression that they are still alive and can be possibly brought to the sky, if the circumstances are favorable. It means the traditional culture of the city has so many indigenous plans in its store to further dynamize the sociopolitical aspects of the society. These hidden kites in the basement stand for the ideal dreams of the

cultural city of Lahore. This basement and its content are brought into conflict with the office of the Taliban chief. His office is the factory where various types of bombs are prepared. These bombs are used in suicidal attacks to spread bloodshed everywhere in the city. Then the associates of the Taliban chief continue to comb the internet websites to frame their own version of the syllabus to impose on the people of the city. His committee also remains busy to search out dummies from various stores of the posh areas of the city. The members of the terroristic league visit various colleges and by force disperse co-education classes. Aren't these activities detrimental for the normal character of the city? Shouldn't the masses stand against extremist elements? These are the questions that stick to the mind of the reader to mobilize them for the defense of the playful atmosphere of the city.

Nadeem brings another conflictual configuration in the form of peace versus violence. When the college teacher is stopped by the fundamentalists from imparting traditional education to the class, he manages a music class in the basement of the building. The zealots get its wind and run to the basement and the class is dispersed using violent techniques. Both the male and the female students of the class were uniformly harassed and illtreated. Here a point is worth noting. The students of the class were practicing the sufi poetry and music related to the traditions of Amir Khusra. Khusro was a famous mystic initiate and poet of the medieval India who got popularity across the tenses. Even today his musicality and sensibility remain embedded in the Muslim subjectivity. His artistic contribution to the subcontinent is manifold. Then the fanatic elements of the play attack the Basant activities going on at the house of Mauju. The children, females and the old ones are all bullied by the religiously terroristic attackers in league with the police brigade. The critical minded audience are dragged, through the Ajoka performance of *Lo Phir Basant Aai*, to take into account the matter of violence versus peace; they are encouraged to condemn the regressive and support the progressive ideology.

## **Conclusion**

The present research was initiated to analytically look into the dialectically framed configurations in Shahid Nadeem's play *Lo Phir Basant Aai*. The research, it can be declared humbly, certainly did produce far reaching results. First, the audience automatically is sensitized, in critical sense, when Basant like liberal and playful festival that has been being practiced in the subcontinent since centuries is banned. The audience laugh at the incompetence of the law forcing agencies that are unable to check to the kite makers who produce deadly string with the help of glass and metal. Second, the audience also raise a question over the character of the State that instead of protecting the Basant supporters and putting resistance against the land grabbers, commercial managers and the religiously fanatics, does work in league with them, consciously and unconsciously, to bully the rich cultural traditions. Following Engels' scheme of dialectics, Nadeem in the present play under discussion does consciously pitch the well-entrenched existing ideologies against the emergent fresh ideologies which create a wonderful battle, on the symbolic level, to unavoidably enlist the audience for the healthy reaction. When the conflicting ideologies are pursuing the 'to



and fro' processes consistently, the inconsistencies and irregularities of the ruling structures are exposed. The attempts of the current hegemonies to maintain its already universalized and legitimized are ridiculed when the youthfully useful emergent sociopolitical structures are foregrounded successfully. Third, while watching the play on stage, the audience discover their own cultural identity when they support the supporters of Basant and the kite flying.

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