

Usman ALI

The Role of the Human Body in My Dramatic Art

In a world where Word defines Truth, where politicians entertain people with slogans, where media deceives people with lies—in this world, we need Hamlet with his mousetrap. Every good play should be a mousetrap, and every playwright Hamlet. The Playwright of Ali's Theater, my theater in Pakistan, writes plays as physical mousetraps to catch the conscience of the audience. The human body functions as the spring of this mousetrap by drawing attention to what it means to be a human being.

In my play, *The Last Metaphor*, tales of violence and companionship are fused and set against the beauty of a Pakistani winter replete with crows, cobras, and fireflies. In this play—as shown in the production photos behind me—the stage itself is recreated as a living body: a fire. A pit of coals located center stage. This cracked stage is the space for its fractured characters. The door opens, and the protagonist, Jugnu (Firefly) enters carrying a dead body on his back. He walks menacingly towards the audience, places the body downstage, sits on the stool, and begins to smoke. (Whose body is it?) Banka, the second character, enters with a rope in his hand. He throws the rope downstage and winds it around his arm. No word has been spoken yet. The stage is already awakened before the dialogue begins, and the characters are defined by their physical actions, not by their words. In Ali's Theater, characters express themselves through their gestures and non-verbal movements, and these bodily actions are more important than what they say on stage.

Jugnu's menacing movement towards the body evokes the engagement of one body with another. He continues to tend its wounds and sprinkle incense over it. He knows whose body it is. He does not speak about it. He is seen moving toward the body, and away from it. Banka is a mechanic by profession and repairs the motors in wells. His father and brother died in a well because the rope broke. The physical rope links him to his brother and father. Thus, one character is associated with the body and the other with the rope. The stage will not let them rest: whenever there's a knock on the door both characters get scared. They rush to the door thinking it is the police outside. No one is ever there.

The play ends with a final knock. A dog enters. The dog knows that the body lying on stage is that of another dog who was crushed by a van. Both were friends. The dog kisses the feet of Jugnu, who has been trying to bury the dead dog, for respecting the body of its friend.

The range of physical actions—running towards a door, throwing logs into the pit of fire, preparing and drinking coffee, dressing the wounds of dead body, throwing stage items into the pit, smoking cigarettes, smearing body with coal—are important visceral movements associated with the body which make the play primarily physical rather than oral. When language is filtered through this dramatic ambience, it acquires physical texture. The words come out of the mouth of character like perspiration comes out of the body. Each word, rooted in the soles of the feet of actors, goes straight into the pores of the audience to catch their conscience. This language becomes action, plague, invasion, it becomes immediate, direct,

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Al-Nadi (Jordan), Ali (Pakistan), Goldberg (Venezuela), Pachyan (Armenia)

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raw, visual, it becomes clarity, focus, ritual, movement, gesture, it becomes healing and humane. This theatrical language allows the artist to have profound enquiring engagement with society. To this artist, playwriting is like witnessing a house on fire – you have to shout fire, fire, fire until the people in the house come out. Let us look at the visceral and botanical language in one of Jugnu’s monologues, which I will perform.

JUGNU: Seven O'clock. A stench was coming from the market. The sound of cats and crickets. Five policemen dragged an innocent boy. Ponds sounded with frogs and walls reverberated with crickets. One slapped him and the other spat on him. The rest asked the boy to say aloud, “MAY ALL THE DRUG ADDICTS BE DAMNED!” One boy said the line but the other remained silent. The other was being slapped. The road was littered with empty bottles and dung. They made them stand in the van. The van drove slowly for all the people to watch the boys. The van stopped and a man from the crowd climbed the van and spat on the boys. One crow was sitting on the electric cable above the crowd. The necks were tied. The van was of blue color. One light was broken. The road was untarred. A heap of trash was set on fire. The dust supported the policemen. Shops were opened all around. People had come out to watch the show. A cheap theatre without tickets and curtains. The first act, the shirt is taken off. The second act, the hands are tied. And third act, they are slapped. The fourth act, the spit. The fifth act, the slap. In the end, the audience claps. No panic in the eyes of one boy. Resignation, not submission. Acceptance not protest. Vendors surrounded the theatre. The crow flew from the cable. Caw, caw, caw, caw, caw. The second boy was shivering. One was looking up, the other looking down. The sky was full of stars. Light in the sky. The moon was complete. One boy had a mole at the bottom of the neck. The other boy had a white line on his wrist. One wore the red shirt and the other a black one. Their trousers were of the same color. One had red trousers and the other had red trousers. Caw, caw, caw, caw, caw. The crow was yelling.

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