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A Dialogue with Maha Hasan on Climate and Theatre with special reference to her Play *When Birds Fly Away*

Rachana Pandey



I prefer to consume plays, films and writings that do not oversimplify a situation by giving solutions. Art, according to me, should make us confront the issues that we want to escape from.

- Maha Hasan

Maha Hasan is an environmental engineer and trained theatre and screen actor from Pakistan. Her short play “When Birds Fly Away” was selected as one of the three winners in “The Worldwide Teach-in on Climate and Justice’s juried competition”. This play is written in native Urdu by Maha Hasan and translated to English by Khalid Ahmad. As an actor, her portfolio spans across various mediums. Her work in theatre includes the titular role in an Urdu adaptation of Jean Anouilh's

Antigone (2022), Binni in Mohan Rakesh's *Aadhay Adhooray* (2020), directed by Khalid Ahmad, Nora in *A Doll's House* (2019) and Bottom in an Urdu adaptation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (2019). Maha has also made several notable television appearances, including *Ishqiya* (2020), *Safar Tamam Hua* (2021), *Tumharay Husn Ke Naam* (2022) and *Yunhi* (2023). She is set to appear in *Farar*, a webseries for Zee5, directed by Mehreen Jabbar, and has also appeared in a cineplay called *Maya*, directed by Kanwal Khoosat for the embassy of the Netherlands.

Dr. Rachana Pandey is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English, Vasanta College for Women (Admitted to the Privileges of Banaras Hindu University), Krishnamurti Foundation India, Rajghat, Varanasi, India. She was a recipient of the prestigious Charles Wallace India Trust Research Grant in 2017. Her interviews of renowned playwright Manjula Padmanabhan, Director and Writer Jatinder Verma and Gautam Chatterjee are published in reputed journals. She is the Newsletter Co-editor (Sept. 2021 onwards) of The International Centre for Women Playwrights (ICWP), Ohio, USA. Her areas of interest include Theatre, Performance and Gender Studies.

The Interview, 17 March 2023

RP. *Ms Hasan, please tell us something about you.*

MH. I am a trained theatre artist, actor and an aspiring playwright. I did my graduation in Environmental Engineering from National University of Sciences & Technology (NUST) however, later on, my passion for the performing arts took over me completely. Hence I sought training in Theatre Arts from National Academy of Performing Arts (NAPA) and am currently

learning Hindustani Classical vocals from Ashvini Modak Ji. Other than that, I am involved with Khan Academy in the capacity of Secondary Mathematics video creator for their Khan Academy Urdu Project.

RP. How long have you been in the field of theatre and acting on screen? Please tell us something about your plays.

MH. It has been 4 years since I started my acting journey, including the time I spent training as an actor at NAPA. I have been fortunate enough to be a part of plays like *Antigone*, *Aadhay Adhoore*, *A Doll's House* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. My inclination has always been to be involved in plays that question societal quo and encourage progressive thinking. I hope this reflects in the choices I have made and will continue to make.

RP. After reading your short play *When Birds Fly Away*, a question that occurs is what motivated you to write a play on climate change? Has it been performed? If yes, how it has been received by the audience?

MH. If I were to be honest, the idea of this play came to me in my sleep. I was smart enough to wake up and seize the moment. However, once I jotted down the first draft and reflected upon it, I could see how this play had dawned upon me. I had done an internship in an environmental consultancy firm during the third year of my undergraduate program. My first assignment as an intern was to go through an Environment Impact Assessment report for a coal fired power plant that was to be installed in Thar. Somehow, the flora and fauna of that area and the details of ecological and social impacts of the project that were mentioned in the report remained in my subconscious and that became the backdrop of this play. This play has not been performed anywhere as of now. I submitted the play in “Worldwide Teach-in on Climate and Justice’s juried

competition”. It has been selected as one of the three winners. Theatre groups from all over the world are welcome to perform this play to take the discourse on climate change ahead.

RP. The ending of the play is quite moving as it goes “The stage goes dark. Gunshot is heard.” Does it suggest a hopeless situation for human civilization? If you would have given an alternative ending, how would it be?

MH. Personally, I prefer to consume plays, films and writings that do not oversimplify a situation by giving solutions. Art, according to me, should make us confront the issues that we want to escape from. It should make the audience ponder and question and yearn for a better reality. This is how art becomes the catalyst for any kind of change to come about. I hoped to achieve this effect by ending the play in such a way. It is open ended. Audience can perceive the ending however their imagination allows them to. I would not want the play to end in any other way.

RP. The play refers to the changes that have been coming due to the increasing number of factories consuming agricultural lands and the whole process of change from non-industrial to industrial is painful for the natives of the land, for all: humans, birds and animals.

What is your take on it?

MH. Human civilization has witnessed some great advancement from the 20th century onwards. We owe a lot to the Industrial Revolution, too. The changes in mode of production opened up a plethora of possibilities for humans. However, the progression has happened in such an aggressive manner that little to no chance was given for the natural and social dynamics to adjust to this change. The question that occurs to me is, can we really call any change advancement if it encourages inequity and is unsustainable?

RP. What could be an alternative way of living according to you? Can it be non-violent, progressive and development-oriented at the same time?

MH. I am an idealist at heart and I believe we can have the best of both worlds if the development corporations are willing to compromise on profits for the greater good. Capitalism is one of the greatest vices that Industrial Revolution had given birth to and then as a consequence, environmental degradation, climate change and social inequity followed. We need to realize that nature, animals, plants and humans of all races and backgrounds are all equally important in any society. Once this realization kicks in, we will only allow those developments to happen that will not give rise to social inequity and climate injustice. This is how sustainable advancements can happen. It is not impossible to do so however, this will definitely make the 1.1% of the global rich which has 45.8% of the total wealth lose out on money. I for one, would not mind if that happens.

RP. How can theatre be used as a medium to address and be aware of the earnest issues like ecological crisis and climate change?

MH. Theatre is one such medium that does not require a lot of capital cost in order to reach the masses. Elaborate sets, costumes, production design and technical support is a luxury, not a need when it comes to theatre. This is why logistically, theatre can be used by anyone, anywhere to tell stories that matter. Now if we are to use theatre as a tool to address ecological crisis then we will need to write plays that are contextualized, written in simple spoken language, easy to perform and are engaging as well. Street theatres have always been great for mobilizing the masses and its power cannot be underestimated, even today. So personally, I feel street theatre is the way to go!

RP. Thank you!