



# THE VULGAR IN THE VERNACULAR: FROM MEERAJI TO PUNJABI THEATRE

Hammad Bilal

For a State of the pure, Pakistan is obsessed with the obscene. But with the simplistic yet irresolvable contradictions and implications of the term in our parlance, it might do us good to qualify the 'obscene' and put the definition out of its misery. The 'obscene' is a challenge, a transgression, a counter-position to that which is mainstream, normal. It is also, supposedly, and sporadically, the label attached to mainstream, commercial Punjabi theatre that is barely acknowledged in official legislation much less in regulatory practice, except in times of a 'crackdown.' Coincidentally, it is in the middle of one such crackdown, with show-cause notices served to producers and 23 stage performers in Punjab in August of this year. The charges of obscenity demand to be engaged with, and with it, the affective experiences and transfixed (male) gazes that these quasi-underground performances continue to bring to mass audiences at theatres around the region. But rather than qualify the boundaries of vulgarity factually, let's look at another trickster, a cultural outsider to the art scene, the Urdu poet Meeraji. One might've opted for Manto too, a case study of colonial obscenity laws – those, mind you, that are still operational today: the Dramatic Performances Act 1876. But Meeraji blurs the boundary between the vulgar and the vernacular, the obscene and the stage-scene in a surprisingly resonant practice as does the precarious labor class that is villainised as enemies of public morality.

The public capitalist space has always had a contentious history between the desired and the commodified objects. This system of representation has been depicted

repeatedly in trials of the obscene, the vulgar, and the morally repugnant. But what exactly constitutes these overt, stratified aversions to particular cultural products as opposed to others that let bourgeois sensibilities actualise this divide between the public and the private, the moral and the immoral, the abstract and the ethereal? Pakistan's arts and cultural machinery has deconstructed this 'vulgar' status quo without providing a much-needed alternative. The ramifications it bears on both commercial and parallel theatre though, are unalterable.

When pulled out of the ambit of South Asia, the infamous poet Meeraji (born Sana'ullah Dar) becomes an even 'transcendent' concept, who is not beholden to a single vernacularisation but accesses multiple strands of different languages — spanning the cultural to the spiritual or the intellectual capital of both the Western and the Eastern worlds. In the milieu of Meeraji, these rich aesthetic sensibilities are synthesised to the point of opening up more possibilities for Urdu, specifically lyrical text in Urdu, and adding value through vernacularisation. It is ironic that lyrical romantic poetry can be as brutal as this. But Meeraji's craft continued to explore the mimetic poetics of the workers, of the poor, of the gender minorities by adding his own code and inscribing it into a network of allusions — "ik baat meñ bhī sau bāteñ haiñ".

The same metaphorical play has been the lifeblood of a particularly venal theatre, the 'mujra.' The recent spate of allegations against the genre in commercial theatre has been concerned with the layering of the script as a

conduit for racy, double-entendres. This in a nation where the literal language of abuse has always been female is an ironic notion. Even entertaining this notion for once, the stage is merely an encapsulation of all the different unyielding and dismal or equally appreciative and accommodating features of the mainstream's public performances and private obsessions. It is also true that one of those obsessions is staving off hunger and making a living. The 'low-brow' content in this theatre may not come out of a literary decision to add another prayer to the domain of theatre. It is on one level, simply what it proclaims to be, a 'commercial' enterprise.

But it is Meeraji's poem, "Adam ki Khala" that brings me to the central feature of my argument, how Meeraji rallied against being the passive representation, and became the active representative instead. They reflect on the controls placed on them by society, with the 'wind of the west' drowning out local noises. This could also mean the self-coloniser who has drowned out the voice of nature — in all its disparities and chaotic differences which state and society have taken upon themselves to hedge and hegemonise.

However, the State's response to ban public performances at Al-Hamra and under its PAC branches confuses the Artist as an Individual and the Artist as a Nationalist. Thus, mainstream theatre addresses itself as the source of public will, and does so without the evangelical conviction of their peers and predecessors in the more sanctified yet less mainstream 'parallel theatre'. Meanwhile, the encroachment of government in the philosophical realm of ethics dictates a stark reality for public performers who are now forced to cosign on to unregulated, 'private parties' as their means to a living. The implications of this unregulated medium are lesser security for the performers and greater physical and professional insecurity.

This is not to mention a grave cultural insecurity on a national level. Because, vernacular literature, poetics, or theatre, open up spaces into the particular and the local by abstracting it into the universal and at the same time ensuring that none of these things lose their purchase in this transformation. In tandem with our contemporary dilemma, Meeraji mobilised a convincing account of the labourer who is at the centre of different dialectics in his personal and professional life — both the personal and professional source of his identity, one informs the other. This playful process continues into vernacularisation and speaks to the record of literary writing itself. He does this by schematising the language of labour and tradition and envisioning its conversion into political terms, mediated by the terms of religion, into a 'labour' of commitment that the performer has towards their goals. It's easy to notice the same labour that curtains and calls on to the stage a nightly ritual of dance and performance at any one of the numerous commercial Punjabi theatres that for one, centre female performers and pay them accordingly — the highest of their male counterparts.

Perhaps a startling comparison at first, one sees words of cultural significance in both Meeraji and our mainstream theatre, portraying aesthetic objects and using them to transmute a point to serve their philosophical point of view. Both use vernacular not just as an ideal, but in practice and use its linguistic and cultural possibilities to exalt its status. They differ from Oriental terms of service and present their own conceptualisation of the Oriental objects. Thus, we can excavate similarities between the two in their objective — their etiology might be different i.e., their motivation for diving into this enterprise might be different, and their approach largely different — one uses Azad Nazm in the post-modernist tradition, and the other regards bodily performance as a vital part of composition — but the prognosis is roughly similar. The prognosis is that both claim back the vernacular tradition through poetry and dance — where both have been rallying against the colonial subjugation of local languages and traditions through an appeal to the local craftsmen who have been relegated to the periphery amidst the coloniser's dichotomisation of local knowledge systems as secondary to European conception of art.

Similarly, the theatre of the vulgar, so deemed to ostracise it from the norm, is also about professing one's appetite in a franker way without self-judgment, instead of a society that denigrates appetites and freedoms. Meeraji too, by writing as a pornographic writer, is recast into the role of a minor hero. That particular activity is brought to light in the following evidence that Meeraji left off his struggle — you can't read the anguish of the migrant, who feels like an outcast in his own society, who has been ousted either by foreign colonisers or regressive attitudes in his own society, but in writing Meeraji makes it articulate. One senses that he has more in common with the economic or social outcast than appearances may betray.

*The author is a graduate in History and Comparative Literature from the Lahore University of Management Sciences.*