RESEARCH PAPER

A Metatheatrical Study of Shahid Nadeem's Play *Dara* through Historical Distancing

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Introduction

The writers take historical figures in their works to challenge the dominant regime by redefining, reconstructing, revisiting, and reshaping the historical facts, and events. The stances of the very pieces of literature have been presented in a dialectical way where they attempt to transform the audience by distancing them away from the identification, to meditate and ponder upon the issue. The current research investigates historical distancing in Shahid Nadeem's play, *Dara.* For this purpose, the study has taken the insights of Richard Hornby's (1986) model of meta-theatre from his book *Drama, Metadrama, and Perception*, Nietzsche's third type of historical division i. e "the critical" perspective from his book *On the Advantages and Disadvantages of History for Life* (1874), and Brecht's concept of historicization which is a part of the alienation effect.

Shahid Nadeem is a writer, director, and producer, who started Ajoka theatre with Madeeha Gohar which means "aj-ka, today or contemporary" (Kyani et al., 2019, p. 82). The purpose of it was to establish the tradition of art and to "favor several forms of art in theatre including actors, directors, producers, set designers, visual artists, and musicians" (Majid, 2015, p. 25). Additionally, Ajoka aims to challenge the

false dominations and urge the people towards an effort to gain their rights. According to Ajoka "if there is more conflict, there is more effective theatre" as cited in (Majid, 2015, p. 29).

Nadeem has presented Dara Shikoh, a 16ᵗʰ-century figure, a Sufi poet, and intellectual in his play *Dara*, son of a Mughal emperor Shah Jahan who was to get hold of the throne after his father. He is a scholar of inter-religion harmony. To find the similarities, he translates the major works of Hinduism and Sikhism. Aurangzeb, his brother gained power and imprisoned him. The war of succession takes place in which Aurangzeb defeats Dara Shikoh. After some time, Aurangzeb imprisons Dara for execution. In the meanwhile, they got to know that Dara is loved by the public very much. To counter the problem and to avoid any kind of revolt, the authorities plan to kill him by blasphemous remarks in his poetry and works. Moreover, Ronder & Nadeem (2021) is of the view that the story is set "in 1658, Dara, the beloved Crown Prince of the Mughal Empire, Sufi, poet, compassionate thinker, and his conservative younger brother, Aurangzeb, battled bloodily for their father's throne. Their difference of opinion about how they as Muslim rulers should deal with the Hindustan (p. 4)". The purpose of this play is described by Shahid Nadeem himself as to "revisit this critical and dramatic point in our history" (Ronder & Nadeem, 2021, p. 6).

Literature Review

Metatheatre

The Greek origin word "Meta" has been traced as "alongside", "beyond", "among", "with" and "after" by Nadia Anwar (2016) and CHEN Jing-xia (2019) but epistemologically, Anwar (2016) relates it with "about" which is used as prefix "signifying the knowledge of phenomena with regards to its category or nature" (p.18). By using this prefix, metatheatre/metadrama is denoted as "the concept of self-reflectivity, is a scrutiny of and concern with theatricality and the making of theatre" (CHEN Jing-Xia, 2019, p. 35).

Metatheatre came into much significance when Lionel Abel (1963) used it in his work *Metatheatre: A New View of Dramatic Form*. As far as the definitions of metatheatre are concerned, Abel (1963) defines metatheatre as the "theatre pieces about life seen as already theatricalized" (p. 60). He discusses the theatre inside the theatre which has nothing to do outside of it. His theory talks about two stages: "first, the world was a stage; second, life was a dream" (CHEN Jing-Xia, 2019, p. 35). Abel (2003) finds the purpose of theatre as the glorification of theatre itself.

Furthermore, Richard Hornby's work *Drama, Metadrama and Perception* (1986) is a seminal one in respect to providing a more detailed definition and classification of metatheatre. According to him, it is a "drama about drama. It occurs whenever the subject of a play turns out to be, in some sense, the drama itself" (1986, p. 31). In this regard, Jing-xia (2019) observes that "it implies self-reflexivity or a type of literature that is aware of itself as a literary object and concerned with the process of its own making. It is characterized by theatricality, self-awareness, self-reflexivity, and self-knowledge" (CHEN Jing-Xia, 2019, p. 36). Hornby has mentioned five types of metatheatrical varieties in his book, which are "the play within the play, the ceremony within the play, role-playing within the role, literary and real-life reference,

and self-reference" (1986, p. 7). The current study has taken real-life references as it provides the best framework.

Historical Drama

Taking the material from history to produce or adopt a play is not a new practice. It has been opted by many writers across the eras and areas. For example, Shakespeare took the story of Julius Caesar, in England; Wole Soyinka based his play *Death and the King's Horseman* on the event which happened in 1944, in Nigeria (Adeoye & Jays, 2010, p. 190). German dramatist Brecht's play *The Life of Galileo* is based on the astronomer of the 17th century. The same is the case with Shahid Nadeem's plays *Bulha* and *Dara*, in Pakistan. The former was based on the Sufi poet of the 18th century and the latter belongs to the statesman and Sufi poet of the 17th century. Similarly, Girish Karnad from India also followed the tradition in this respect and took the material from the 14th century Sultan of Delhi in his historical play *Tughlaq*. Additionally, he wrote his play *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* by adapting the historical ruler of the 18th century.

Moreover, "historical drama as a dramatic genre occupies a veritable position in dramatic literature" (Adeoye & Jays, 2010, p. 190). The playwrights try to adapt, re-write, and review the historical events according to their fields and interests. In this way, the creation of historical drama produces a distinguishing effect on the contemporary as well as the future audience but Adeoye & Jays (2010) highlight the weakness of the genre that the "playwright is free to rework and reorganize the actual story so that they become more functional in developing … script to evoke the spirit of oneness" (p. 191).

Historical Distancing

The foremost point here is to define the 'distance'. It seems hard to designate its meanings with the pastness, away from the present, or something matter of the past while Mark Salber Phillips (2004) has discussed its relation with the "detachment and separation" though he is not in total agreement with this association. He further traces it in the oppositeness of 'proximity' to make it agreeable with the term. Moreover, he adds that the term though inflexible, can "be used to refer to whatever has the effect of putting things at a distance" (p. 126).

Due to the absence of previous scholarships on 'distance', it is not easy to define it sequentially. However, Jaap Hollander et al. (2011) in "Introduction: The Metaphor of Historical Distancing" traces distance not as a concept, issue, or problem but as a metaphor that is multi-layered in its understanding. They are of the view that this metaphor may "convey a variety of meanings in a variety of contexts" (p. 4).

Additionally, the point of pondering as far as this study is concerned is to discuss the 'distance' in the context of history. For instance, distance is far from the understanding without looking into the past. Whether the past has the potential to redefine the present or the present can revisit the past? Moreover, how to realize the phenomena of taking and understanding the material from the past by ignoring the elements of construction and biasedness. Philips (2013) investigates that "for both the historian and the reader, I have come to realize, distance is both historically given and historiographically constructed in ways that move far beyond the standard

association of distance with objectivity and the passage of time" (On Historical Distancing, p. xi). In this way, it is tough to conclude the idea of 'historical distancing' for the reason of the existing elements of the construction of history in history itself.

Furthermore, the discussion moves on by referring to Hume who tries to affiliate the past with the future as well. He talks about the relationship between the past and the future by arguing that 'historical distance' has connected the world with us in multiple ways; sometimes by putting pressure on society and sometimes by going away from time and space. He says that "historical distance encompasses the variety of ways in which we are placed concerning the past or to put the case more fully—to the futures that the past makes possible" as cited in (Phillips, 2013, On Historical Distancing, p. 12). This study looks the history by putting the historical events, and facts into a distance. It means the future can be altered if we critically view history.

As far as the previous studies are concerned, Altaf et al. (2020) in a research article entitled "Shahid Nadeem's Play Dara and the Distortion of the History" have explored the distorted element of history through Foucault's power-knowledge nexus. Altaf et al. (2020) lacked in discussing the illusionist world of theatre because the play was written to be performed. The current study fulfills the gap by taking the metatheatrical perspective which discusses the self-reflexivity of theatre. Moreover, Sumya Abid (2011) in her thesis "Exploring the Role of Storytelling in Shahid Nadeem's Plays through Conversational Narrative" explored Nadeem's major plays from a Narratological aspect but she didn't add *Dara* in her thesis.

Material and Methods

This section of the study is about the research methods and designs used while conducting the research. The nature of the study is qualitative and explorative. For this purpose, several books, research articles, reviews, and internet sources have been consulted and used. The in-depth reading and analysis of the text have helped to a vivid exploration of the hidden meaning of the selected text.

Theoretical Framework and Assumptions of the Study

There are three assumptions of the study:

a) Metatheatrical perspective highlights the illusionist world of theatre and distances the audience from the identification with the actors and characters on the stage.

b) The critical judgment of the past re-shapes, re-constructs, re-visits, and re-defines the historical events and facts.

c) By challenging the historical representation, a dialectical understanding of historical facts and events is possible to alter the future.

For the first level, Hornby's (1986) lens of real-life reference has been used that disrupts the action on stage. Richard Hornby (1986) in his seminal work *Drama, Metadrama, and Perception* discusses real-life reference that is a source of creating a metadramatic effect on the audience. According to him "Real-Life reference is in many ways congruent to literary reference. Real-life reference includes an allusion to

real persons, living or dead; real places; real objects; real events" (p. 95). However, the effect can only be proportional. It depends on the people whether they know the person, place, or event under discussion. The effect will be more metadramatic if they have enough information and vice versa. Additionally, he stresses that it will be more effective if "the audience recognizes what is being referred to and whether it is recent, controversial, and unique" (p. 95).

Hornby (1986), furthermore categorizes the real-life reference into four types which may create a metadramatic effect on the audience i. e "citation, allegory, parody, and adaptations" (p. 95). Again, the effect can be associated with the proportionality of knowledge on the audience's part that how much they are aware of the person, place, or situation. He includes the "direct quotation of a real-life person's words, or the depiction of such a person himself, or the depiction of real-life objects, places, or things as themselves" (p. 95) in Real-Life reference.

However, it is not complementary that all types must create a metadramatic effect on the audience. For example, playwrights often use 'adaptation' in their plays but it may not produce disruption each time. The reason behind this is the difficulty to distinguish between the 'real' and 'unreal'. Hornby (1986) explains the issue by giving the example of *Macbeth* in which "the witches [are] based on folklore, seem just as tangible and vivid as Macbeth himself, based on a real Scottish king" (p. 96). In this way, it can be argued that the action should not be presented as it is a matter of reality because there are multi-layered fictitious elements on the stage that portray the fictive nature of the theatre, and "they only become dramatic when they no longer seem real, but fictitious" (Hornby, 1986, p. 97).

The metadramatic effects can also be gained by discussing the difference between live performance and reading the play on printed pages. The effect is linked with the theatre where people know that one mistake can be disastrous for the whole performance. On the contrary, the printed pages can't produce such feelings in the reader. This aspect makes the audience realize the fictive nature of the theatre "that there is so much that can go wrong, that performance always teeters on the brink of disaster, yet at the same time seems so solid, so tangible, so all in all" (Hornby, 1986, p. 99). He calls "literary and real-life references are signs of a healthy theatre" and highlights that the actors, playwrights, and directors should engage the audience to create a dramatic illusion.

The second level of the assumptions is the critical judgment of the past which re-shapes, re-constructs, re-visits, and re-defines the historical events and facts. For this purpose, the critical judgment part has been taken from the third kind of history mentioned by Friedrich Nietzsche in his work *On the Advantages and Disadvantages of History for Life* (1874) which discusses the phenomena of past and present. He divides history into three kinds: "the monumental, the antiquarian, and the critical". The monumental talks about the greatness of the past that the people had gained in history can be attained again. The Antiquarian discusses that "history belongs to the preserving and revering soul- to him who with loyalty and love looks back on his origins and gives thanks for his existence" (1874, p. 19). The critical in which "[man] must have the strength . . . to shatter and dissolve something to enable him to live: this he achieves by dragging it to the bar of judgment, interrogating it meticulously and finally condemning it" (Nietzsche, 1874, p. 21).

In addition to the second level, Phillips (2004) discusses the idea of 'historical distancing' and its subsequent representation in the past. The argument is that historical events are not received only but "they also reconstruct and reshape that distance in a variety of ways that bear upon every aspect of our view of the past. Every history, after all, has to establish relationships of engagement and detachment, insight and overview, which connect it with the past it describes, and every subsequent reading of history" (p. 125). In this context, it can be argued that 'historical distance' not only reshapes the past but also provides a gateway to understanding the events that appeared after one another in history. This connectivity of relation links the events that establish a chain in history.

The third level of the assumptions is Brecht's concept of Historicization. Brecht's concept of Historicization sees the idea to challenge historical representations. It highlights the discontinuity of history "that did not treat the historical mistakes of the past as aberrations, but as the product of certain contradictions that can also be identified in the present" (Koutsourakis, 2012, p. 169). He further casts his vote in the favor of 'historical representations' as a process that provides background through its connectivity. The aforementioned representation lacks in having accuracy and truthfulness, in this regard. It gives the understanding of the facts and events of history to change the present and future. In this background, Koutsourakis (2012) investigates that Brecht's concept of historicization "does not provide us with an understanding of the workings of history. It is only using a theoretical reconstruction and re-viewing of the facts that historical effects can be appreciated and understood where the historical past and present are nothing but an established narrative" that works for the "transformation of the audience's historical consciousness" (p. 170).

In this regard, Brecht does not provide a constant view of history but a continuously changing nature of it. By presenting contemporary issues like "fascism, injustice, economics, war, etc.", he takes history as the setting in his works. The reason behind this is to confront the audience about the realities of society. He sees history as "neither are the situations of our current present moment fixed, permanent, or inevitable, but rather changeable and improvable" (Buwert, 2013, p. 7).

Analysis and Exposition

This section of the study discusses Shahid Nadeem's *Dara* with the assumptions of the study mentioned above. The assumptions claim that the historical plays can be analyzed by placing them in the distance through the historical meta-theatricality. The stance is that there are plenty of metatheatrical elements in Shahid Nadeem's dramaturgy which can be linked with historical distancing. For example, the historical story of Dara itself is metatheatrical. It deals with the real historical figure of the 17th century. Richard Hornby (1986) in his seminal work *Drama, Metadrama, and Perception* explains Real-life reference that is a source of creating a metadramatic/metatheatrical effect on the audience. According to him "Real-Life reference is in many ways congruent to literary reference. Real-life reference includes an allusion to real persons, living or dead; real places; real objects; real events" (p. 95). Dara is a real dead person of history and by placing his story on stage, Nadeem has created metatheatrical effects on the audience. He has taken the story for the purpose to change the reaction of the people regarding the established narrative against him.

Moreover, he has achieved his goals by attempting to correct some preconceived notions regarding Dara and his execution by using the revised information to create a fictive construct on the stage. The intermingling elements of the real and the unreal constructs; discourage complete emotional immersion and promotes dialectical understanding of events and characters. The distancing from the historical presentation on stage makes the audience think critically about the history. It further motivated them to not react in the same manner if any congruent event happens in contemporary settings. In this way, it can also be argued that they can change the future in the context of historical understanding.

In addition, Nadeem has taken his material from the real person Dara from history, the crown prince of Emperor Shah Jahan. Furthermore, the event of his execution at the hands of his brother Aurangzeb Alamgir has historical implications in Indo-Pak history. People still talk about the way of execution by blaming blasphemy on him instead of killing him in a war. The very way of execution makes it further metatheatrical because it hints at the controversial nature of the event. The allusion to the real historical person and controversial event encourages the people to talk about it critically.

Furthermore, the audience can only be distanced if they know the particular history. The more they know the matter, the more metatheatrical effect will be produced. Hornby (1986) argues that the effect can only be proportional. It depends on the people whether they know the person, place, or event under discussion. The effect will be more metadramatic if they have enough information and vice versa. Additionally, he stresses that it will be more effective if "the audience recognizes what is being referred to and whether it is recent, controversial, and unique" (p. 95).

On the contrary, the purpose of this knowledge is to produce a distancing effect on the audience that highlights the illusionistic nature of the drama, and theatre. In this way, the identification with the actors and characters can be discouraged. Styan (1975) has traced the meanings of 'illusion' from Latin as "to mock" which is derived from the word *ludere* meaning "to play". In this way, theatre likes to play with mocking. Moreover, he is of the view that a "favorite activity of the theatre is to play with the idea of illusion itself, to mock the very thing it most tries to create" (p. 180) which is accepted by the audience.

By watching *Dara* on stage, the historical metatheatre disrupts the action. In this regard, the audience can understand the illusionary world. The most discussed phenomenon in dramatic illusion is that audience is fully aware of the phenomenon that the action is fully related to the theatre and performance but still, they are caught up in the illusory nature of pity, fear, and suspense. The mingling of imaginary and real states deviates the audience and they forget the theatrical world by absorbing themselves into the performance on stage. Cilliers (1996) is of the view that "children and naive audiences can become so involved that they completely forget their surroundings and believe the events on the stage to be real". Additionally, "Calderwood and Toliver, consider it not an aesthetic experience, but a kind of hypnotic trance" as cited in (p. 106). In this context, it can be claimed that "illusion is the province of all theatre" (Styan, 1975, p. 180) which is needed to be accounted for to hold the concentration of the audience towards the performance and its message rather be engaged in the process of identification.

Additionally, the purposes of dramatists' efforts to rework, deconstruct and re-write the historical events are to produce an emotional effect on the audience and to provide new meanings or to evoke similar occurrences of previous stories in the contemporary setting. They sometimes, review the old story by giving it a new connotation according to the contemporary settings and happenings (Adeoye & Jays, 2010). Nadeem's *Dara* gives a new voice to the historical event. Previously, Aurangzeb was considered a hero, and Dara was attributed with villainy characteristics. For example, the claim of Altaf et al. (2020) is that the historical facts and events are distortedly narrated as far as the historical figure Dara is concerned. He concludes that Aurangzeb Alamgir is presented as a hero of Islamic history in the educational books whereas Dara is a type of villainous person. The finding of his research is that Shahid Nadeem's play *Dara* questions the above-mentioned representation of Dara and proclaims to dig out the true history. The mentioned research argued that Aurangzeb used Islam to kill his brother Dara, who was the crown prince.

Furthermore, Altaf et al. (2020) used Foucault's power-knowledge nexus which regards "all history is subjective, written by people whose personal biases affect their interpretation of the past" as cited in (Altaf et al., 2020, p. 40). In this background, it is argued by the researchers that the representation of Dara as a villain, and Aurangzeb as a hero is biased. The narration is done by the State through the use of educational institutions. However, Shahid Nadeem has presented the true reclamation of history. But the question arises that if the previous representations are biased then how the current narration of Shahid Nadeem in the play is devoid of personal likeness and favoritism. Although the research talks about the need to re-define Mughal history it does not tell how to execute the task. Furthermore, it lacks in telling the fictional presentation of the play because it was written to be performed. Hornby (1986) is of the view that "literary and real-life references are signs of a healthy theatre" (p. 90) that prompts the actors, playwrights, and directors to engage the audience to create a dramatic illusion. The current study fulfills the gap by defining the play through the metatheatrical perspective which also talks about the fictional nature of the drama and theatre.

However, a careful 'hindsight understanding' is required to become familiar with the past to know the unknown. This process of becoming familiar otherwise may lead the historians astray if they rely solely on their wisdom about the unknown events and objects of history. Moreover, Hollander et al. (2011) have discussed the division of 'distancing' into two kinds; the 'minimizers' and the 'maximizers'. The 'minimizers' claim that the past and present are not similar but "separated by an (ontological) gap that ought to be bridged (cognitively)". The problems arise for the 'minimizers' in this way to distinguish the object of study given in the present but they need to separate themselves from the very object of study they required to represent the object in respect of 'historical understanding' (p. 5). In this background, to overcome this ontological gap, German writers Von Ranke and Wilhelm Dilthey try to give a solution that it is historians' task to dig out the historical understanding by "losing themselves in the past" because "historical understanding (Verstehen) required a kind of empathy (einfühlen) through which historians could put themselves in someone else's shoes" (p. 6).

On the contrary, the 'maximizers' have looked at the idea from a different perspective. They argue that the 'past and the present can't be distinguished

accurately because the "clear distinctions between past and present do not exist, if only because the present is so much a result of the past that it is hard to say where "the past" stops and "the present" begins" (p. 5). In this context, for a better understanding of history, one needs to create distance from the very object of study. The distancing will "allow an idea, a text, or an image to appear as a historical object of study" (Hollander et al., 2011, p. 5).

Shahid Nadeem is not on either side because he has taken his material from history to view it critically. Further, he constructs a theatrical world through which he tries to revisit and reconstruct history. The reinterpretation of the event able him to provide a dialectical view for the audience. He views history as what Nietzsche terms "the Critical" to reshape and redefine the event. For example, he highlights the missing element of the story that Dara was executed on the charge of blasphemy because Aurangzeb was afraid of his popularity. The following conversation between Mullah Farooq and Aurangzeb provides the very mindset behind the charge:

MULLAH FAROOQ. You have defeated Dara – politically he is isolated, the governors and gentry are with you, physically he is imprisoned – yet there is a piece of ground where he remains undefeated.

AURANGZEB. Which ground?

MULLAH FAROOQ. On the high ground, he is morally strong. He has spent time developing his mind, and his search for the commonality between people can make him seem, saintly. (Ronder & Nadeem, 2021, p. 47)

The above-mentioned conversation is proof of their intention to degrade Dara on high moral grounds. They plan to announce him as an infidel publicly to make him a controversial figure in the eyes of people who adore him. The other conversation between Aurangzeb and Mullah Farooq is a clear example:

MULLAH FAROOQ. Therefore, it is not just his physical form that must perish, but also his mythology.

AURANGZEB. How?

MULLAH FAROOQ. Were it proven that Dara defied, not only a brother but flouted God himself, an Islamic ruler would be invoked to take serious action.

MULLAH FAROOQ. The greater divine injunction would speak to Dara's desertion of Islam, where it proved that he no longer upheld Islam's supremacy and could therefore be called – an infidel. (Ronder & Nadeem, 2021, p. 47)

The conversation is a way toward the blasphemous charge on Dara so that they could save themselves from the public wrath or any expected revolt against them. In this way, Nadeem has provided the missing perspective of history about the unsung hero of Mughal history. Simultaneously, by listening to the conversation, Roshanara, the sister, and ally of Aurangzeb called it a "clever" and "shrewd" scheme. Roshanara further opposes the expected favor to Dara when Jahanara, another sister of the princes, and a supporter of Dara in the family comes to persuade Aurangzeb for forgiveness. She says to Aurangzeb that "You cannot do this, Aurangzeb, we will never have real power if Dara lives!" (p. 54). On the contrary,

when Aurangzeb rejects the proposal of Jahanara, she utters excitedly "that's my Emperor" (p. 54). Finally, they execute their plan with the help of Qazi by announcing the death sentence.

Nadeem's dramaturgy and selection of topics have provided an interventionist thought which dissolves the fourth wall. Through the reinterpretation of history, Nadeem attempts to correct the historical events and facts about prince Dara. The very challenge to historical representation is similar to Brecht's idea of historicization "that did not treat the historical mistakes of the past as aberrations, but as the product of certain contradictions that can also be identified in the present" (Koutsourakis, 2012, p. 169). In this way, the established narratives are deconstructed by Nadeem to transform the audience.

Conclusion

The study has three central stances. Firstly, the theatre is an illusionistic world where dramatists present their content matter to persuade the audience either of reality or fiction. Shahid Nadeem has taken the historical figure, Dara that created a metatheatrical effect on the audience. The term is technically called a real-life reference in Hornby's (1986) book mentioned above. The historical event of Dara's judicial murder produces metatheatrical effects on the audience which breaks the fourth wall. Secondly, the study has highlighted the perspective that history should be viewed critically. Nadeem has reshaped, redefined, and reconstructed the judicial murder of prince Dara making the hero as villain and villain as hero. Thirdly, the historical representation can be challenged by providing a fresh view of it because its nature is not constant. In this way, through the understanding of history, the future can be changed by not repeating the same response. The current study has investigated that Nadeem has changed the previous narrative of history by looking at it from a different angle.

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