

Interview

Dance, Gender, and Activism in Pakistan: Interview with Performer-Activist Sheema Kermani

Priyanka Basu ^{1*}, Sheema Kermani ²

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ABSTRACT

Sheema Kermani (1951-) is a performer and activist based in Karachi, Pakistan. Through her organisation, *Tebrik-e-Niswan* she has worked towards raising awareness of violence against women and women's empowerment. *Tebrik-e-Niswan* is a cultural organisation invested in social justice through the arts. As a dancer and theatre actor, Sheema Kermani uses her training, choreography, and pedagogy to foreground the activist potential of performing arts. Scholarship on dance and political activism within the larger global context (for example in South Africa and New Zealand) have focussed on dance's potential 'to further social justice and compassionate communities' (Shapiro, 2013: 15) and its power 'to envision, move and create change.' (Shapiro, 2016: 3) Within the contexts of the UK and USA, scholarship on dance and protest have encompassed historical enquiries (Mills, 2021), politics of representation, place, and identity (Prickett, 2013) and embodied choreographies of protest (Foster, 2003). In the South Asian context, dance as counter-hegemonic to communal politics have informed the works of artist-activist, Mallika Sarabhai in India (Grau, 2007). This interview with Sheema Kermani follows the existing strands of research on global dance and activism by focussing specifically on Pakistan. Sheema Kermani talks about her own dance pedagogy in dance and art history, her formative years in the UK and the influences of feminist and Marxist movements, and her continuing work for social justice in Pakistan in the wake of rising religious fundamentalism, gender atrocities, forced migrations and climate crisis.

Keywords: Pakistan, gender, activism, dance, Sheema Kermani

INTRODUCTION

Performer-activist, Sheema Kermani [1951-] is a prominent name not only in Pakistan but also in larger South Asia and internationally. She founded her organisation *Tebrik-e-Niswan*, a cultural action group in 1979 to work primarily with working class women. The organisation has strived to raise awareness about violence against women and the need for their empowerment. She is also one of the major proponents of the annual *Aurat* March (Women's March) movement in Pakistan that has been instrumental in bringing women into the mainstream politics of the country (Batoool and Malik, 2021; Kamal, 2022). Sheema Kermani has deployed her dance (and theatre) practice as a mode of activism against religious fundamentalism and attack on basic human rights. Her views on the politics of dance in Pakistan have been published in an interview with Rekha Pande (2004). Her own essay – 'The Unchanging Reality of Male Dancers in Pakistan' (2022) – maps the history of male dancer-mentors in Pakistan and how there has been little shift in attitudes and cultural policies in Pakistan thus pushing dance to the edge of the margins in terms of social acceptability. In Pakistan, where dance is still seen as taboo and the cultural labour of the dancer is interrogated, Sheema Kermani has continued to perform, mentor and actively campaign for performing arts to be deemed respectable in an Islamic society. More recently, she was seen to appear in a cameo performance for the Coke Studio¹ Season 14 music video, '*Pasoori*' (Conflict), which has become a viral global

¹ For detailed analysis of Coke Studio, media consumption and Pakistani modernity, see Williams and Mahmood (2019).

¹ King's College London, UNITED KINGDOM

² *Tebrik-e-Niswan*, PAKISTAN

*Corresponding Author: priyanka.basu@kcl.ac.uk

phenomenon cutting across borders and linguistic boundaries; thereafter, Kermani has gained a new recognition as the 'Pasoori dancer'.

In this interview², Sheema Kermani talks about her early training in dance in Pakistan under Mr. and Mrs. Ghanshyam and later in India under various mentors who trained her in Indian classical dance styles of *Odissi*, *Kathak* and *Bharatanatyam*. For her, the training in multiple dance styles allowed her the creative freedom in choreographing and not restricting herself to rigid boundaries that the arts are often confined to. She also reveals how her brief educational stint in the UK as an art history student exposed her to the second-wave feminist and Marxist movements in the 1960s, which she used [in pioneering feminist activism] in Pakistan upon her return in 1971. For her, the dictatorial regimes in Pakistan have remained a steady challenge as she decided to be a dancer-activist. As the Global South is gripped by different forms of religious nationalism, precarities of citizenship and statelessness and the larger threat of climate crisis, she tells us how the arts are a necessary medium to bring the countries of Global South together into action.

INTERVIEW

Priyanka Basu: Your early training in dance in Pakistan was under the tutelage of Mr. and Mrs. Ghanshyam (who were themselves trained under Uday Shankar in Almora) as well as various mentors in India. How do you see this training as still contributing to your dance practice, activism, and dance as an intellectual exercise?

Sheema Kermani: I started training with Mr. and Mrs. Ghanshyam when my family moved to Karachi. I was about 13-14 years old around that time. My mother was very keen that both I and my sister learn classical dance. She was herself from Hyderabad (Deccan) and after her marriage she used to go back to her *Ustaad* (music teacher) who would come to the house to teach her. So, she found this couple – Mr. and Mrs. Ghanshyam – in Karachi and we started learning from them. I think I have always appreciated the fact that I had a good grounding in a holistic approach. It was not just as *Kathak*, or *Manipuri* or *Kathakali*, but it was, as you know as per the Almora style, a bit of all these things. So, we did learn all these styles together. What was interesting is that Mr. Ghanshyam himself would choreograph a lot of dance dramas in the Almora style; in the sense that these were big dance dramas with many students taking part in them with all the above-mentioned styles incorporated in these choreographies. I think this was a very interesting way of teaching, learning and of creating work. There is so much scope in trying different moves through different styles and not feeling restricted that this is the only thing one can do. I have continuously felt that this training gave me the vocabulary and impetus to choreograph on different themes in different styles. I found the freedom to use different styles exciting, interesting, and useful for my work. Even today I feel the same way, that one doesn't need to feel restricted in any way.

Priyanka Basu: When you went to India for your dance training in various styles (such as *Bharatanatyam*, *Kathak* and *Odissi*) did you have the same kind of mentorship and feel the confluence of different styles?

Sheema Kermani: No, when I went to India, I felt a strong push from all my teachers that I must stick to only one style. There was this strict sense of purity that if you are learning and practicing *Bharatanatyam* (or *Odissi*), then stick to *Bharatanatyam*. Actually, I cheated in the sense that I did not inform them what styles I was learning. This was because it was so difficult to go to India from Pakistan. I only had my visa for a certain period. I knew that I won't be able to stay endlessly, and I just wanted to learn as much as possible. Here, in Karachi, my guru Mr. Ghanshyam had said, 'Just learn whatever you can, as many things you can. Just try and pick up whatever you can.' However, I did feel the pressure in India to conforming to one style and the question as to why I was running around to learn other styles. But somehow, I was able to manage. I divided my time between different gurus and classes (morning till afternoon) because I had gone just to learn dance. I felt that I had to make each day very fruitful and feasible for myself. In the evenings, I would run to watch performances whether they were dances or music concerts. At that time amazing performances used to take place and you won't believe it, they were all free! That was so much a part of my education while I was in India – to be able to see the best of the gurus perform (dance and music) and to see them at very close quarters. It is a very important part of education because in terms of performing arts, every time you get to watch it closely you learn a lot more. I knew that back in Pakistan one had such little opportunity because there weren't any performances to watch. It was a time when I had the opportunity to sit onstage with Vilayat Khan *sahab* or Bismillah Khan *sahab*, go to the SPICMACAY lectures and talk to them. I felt I learnt a lot from these experiences, just by sitting in their company – it made such a lot of difference.

² The online interview was conducted on Zoom on September 16, 2022.

Priyanka Basu: Similarly, you had gone to the UK for your formal education in art. How do you feel that has contributed to your work in dance as activism?

Sheema Kermani: When I was finishing my A-levels in Karachi, though I was already learning dance I thought I wanted to become a visual artist – a painter. So, I applied to various art colleges, and I got into one of the art colleges in London. I went there in 1969 and came back just after 1971 to Pakistan. Those years in the UK were also a very exciting time for me. It was a time in the West when second-wave feminism was coming up – Germaine Greer and Kate Millet (in the USA) – the hippie style, the Flower Power time, anti-Vietnam War time. There was a lot of intellectual activities taking place and Left-wing political activism happening around me. Art colleges, as you know, are very exciting places. There were opportunities to see many films, theatre productions, and concerts. I felt it was one of the best of times to be in the West at that point. I was naturally very influenced by all these new ideas that were coming up in the West and the exposure I was getting to those ideas, especially to feminism and Marxism. These influenced me a lot. When I came back to Pakistan I came with these ideas and the spirit that I want to be part of the Left movement in Pakistan. There was no women’s movement in Pakistan at that point of time, and therefore I wanted to set up something in that respect in the country.

Priyanka Basu: My aim in asking the previous question was to understand how these journeys to the UK and other countries in the West helped in shaping the artistic sensibilities of several artists (from early Pakistan), e.g., visual artists such as Zainul Abedin and Qamrul Hasan from East Pakistan. (See Hoek and Sunderason, 2019) What do you think about these earlier journeys and your time as well?

Sheema Kermani: The most important point here is that it was a time (in early Pakistan) when religious fundamentalism had not yet entered our lives and Pakistan was still in a way towards progress in this sense. It was a new nation and was still trying to find ways to new ideas and create new institutions. Whatever existed before in (West) Pakistan, i.e., the time before 1971 was much influenced by what was happening in East Pakistan. There were many Bengali musicians and dancers in that period. (See Basu, 2022) This was a very important aspect, which we slowly lost over time. And then, things started changing. Even when Bhutto brought in his concept of Islamic socialism, he stressed upon ‘Islamic’, introduced Friday as a holiday, banned bars and the consumption of alcohol. It is actually from that point onwards that things gradually started deteriorating. But whatever ideas I was exposed to and had gained during my time in the West in the 1960s, I wanted to use them in my work and activism when I came back to Pakistan. I felt that I wanted to work with the women in the country. I really wanted to explore the question as to why the status of women in Pakistan is so low. Who are the most oppressed in the society? And I found them to be the working-class women. This is how I started working.

Priyanka Basu: From when you took up dance as a form of protest after you came back from the UK in 1971, how has it evolved and grown? What are some of the similar and different challenges you face today?

Sheema Kermani: Soon after Bhutto Zia-ul-Haq came into power and it was he who actually banned women from dancing on-stage, especially classical dance. The society, however, became as hypocritical as it could because the irony was that the so-called *mujras* (female dancing for male titillation) continued to be performed in people’s homes including ministers’ houses. Classical dance was banned, and one had to obtain special permissions to perform. The fact that one of the most crucial art forms were banned meant that many of those practicing that art form left the country. Most of the dancers left Pakistan because they felt they couldn’t handle it anymore. However, I stayed on having decided that I will resist this move. I just had that revolutionary spirit in me to challenge that who has the right to tell me that I must not dance. I just felt that this is my fundamental human right, nobody can stop me, and I will continue doing it. Of course, one had to find ways to do it. We have read that in Latin American or South American countries even music was banned by their fascist and authoritarian governments. However, people found ways to sing – whether it was in their churches or in other spaces. In the same way I found ways to dance without advertising it, keeping it very low-key and just informing people through word-of-mouth initially. It was a time when there were no mobile phones. We would make a mailing-list of people who we would then inform about forthcoming performances. It was a challenging yet exciting process, which gave one the hope that this is the way to resist. I strongly feel that if arts can be used as resistance, they become very powerful. They give the artist a lot of hope and courage. That is what I found in my art – it was in my dance, music, and theatre. That is what gave me the courage to resist. Otherwise, you give up and feel that there is no life and future to live for. I have still not given up. I feel that from that time till today it is my art that gives me hope, courage and strength to continue and is a source of happiness.

Priyanka Basu: Have the challenges that you had faced initially now changed completely, or they continue to manifest in similar ways?

Sheema Kermani: I think the challenges continue in a sense, but they change in a lot of ways. At that time, it was the state and the government that were your enemy. I could not get permission from the state and the government to perform inside an auditorium. Very clearly then, you explored what you needed to do and how you needed to go about it. You thought about what the channels were to explore to be able to continue doing what you want to do. Over time, things have changed very drastically and for the worst actually, I would say. Worst how? Even so many years ago, people would always support my work, my dance, or any other work of this kind. This is because they felt that this was the form of resistance to authoritarianism and fascism. The people, therefore, had a reason to support. But slowly what one finds is that religious fundamentalism has seeped into the people, individuals, and the society, into groups of people, and into their thinking and psyche. Now, it is the people who can turn around and attack you. Previously, I have never felt that the public is going to attack me. But today, I would be scared about where I am performing because it can be anyone among the public who can turn around and say that this is their way to heaven so they should get rid of a sinful dancer like me. It is really sad that instead of things moving forward we have just gone backward. Wherever such fundamentalisms rise, similar kinds of reactions happen. One of the worst things about fundamentalism is religious fundamentalism because there so little way out of it. People do not think at the moment when they are reacting, and it is simply a mob mentality that is just ready to react.

Priyanka Basu: You are renowned as the foremost ‘classical’ dancer in Pakistan and continue to practice the dance forms of *Odissi*, *Bharatanatyam* and *Kathak*. How do you use the vocabulary, stories, and guidelines from these styles in new choreographies? How do they facilitate secularism despite their rootedness in religiosity?

Sheema Kermani: Well, yes. That is an interesting question because I myself started to question the whole aspect of religious mythologies that we dance to, whether it is a Radha-Krishna narrative from the *Geetgovind*. For myself, I have always found that they were never religious stories for me but more of mythological stories. They were partially romances, partially erotic, partly devotional, and partly historical. I have always found them very interesting as I have found with all other mythologies. Personally, I have had no great issues with them. I also feel that one needs to look at the larger aspects, e.g., the story of the *Geetgovind*.³ The love affair, the jealousies, the desire to be together – all these come across as human feelings and emotions. This is what I have loved about these stories that you do not necessarily need to see them as emotions of gods and goddesses but rather as human emotions. However, very soon I felt that in Pakistan a lot of these stories did not make sense because people have not read these mythologies, histories, or legends. Of course, at one point when people were watching Indian television, they were familiar with the (Indian epics) *Mahabharat* and *Ramayana* and knew all the episodes. However, that stopped eventually so people do not know those stories anymore. Moreover, people do not also relate to these stories and episodes of Radha and Krishna. This is where I found the aspect of having learnt various dance styles very exciting.

What I had started doing from earlier on was to use Urdu poetry, and even English poetry. So, all my *abhinaya* (acting) would be about things that interested me and were around me. My *abhinaya* was not necessarily always from the *Geetgovind* or a *bhajan*. For me *abhinaya* would be maybe a poem from Iqbal or a poem from Faiz Ahmed Faiz or poetry by Fahmida Riaz, our local Urdu poets. I even did *abhinaya* on English songs. I allowed myself to be innovative about it and I think training from the Ghanshyams helped me a lot in this. I have done a lot of work on Urdu, English and Persian poetry, taken those verses and choreographed on them. It has been an interesting journey. I also think the distance from India helped because if I was in India, it wouldn't have been so easy to do this thing. Having said that I have also performed some of my work in India. I did a lot of *abhinaya* on Sarojini Naidu's poetry. Naidu wrote in English but used rich Eastern or Indian imageries visualising them in the Indian subcontinental settings. I have always found her poetry very interesting to work on.

Priyanka Basu: Two of your renowned choreographies, *Song of Mohenjo-Daro* and *Aao Raqs Karo* (Come, Let Us Dance), are exemplary in this sense. In *Song of Mohenjo-Daro*, you have gone back to explore dance from within the sculptures. Would you like to say something about how you did this?

Sheema Kermani: Sure, I can talk a little bit about that. When I did come back from India and people told me, ‘What is this that you do? It is not Pakistani; it is all Indian and Hindu dance!’. That is when I started going into Mohenjo-Daro and doing my own research on it. Not only did I research on the statuettes, the figurines, and the

³ The story of the *Geetgovind* (a 12th century love poem by the Indian poet, Jayadeva) includes the love tryst between Krishna and Radha, and is divided into 12 chapters, delineating the 12 states of Krishna as a lover. Within its larger context, the narrative indicates human's relationship with God, or the God-human friendship.



Figure 1. Sheema Kermani in a classical Indian *Odissi* dance performance at Arts Council of Pakistan, Karachi (2012). © *Tebrik-e-Niswan*.

relief work but also on the origins of folk dance. What is the harvest dance, why do people dance in the rain and so on. All of these went into building the narrative and choreography of *Song of Mohenjo-Daro*, and I also linked it with contemporary times. My *Song of Mohenjo-Daro* starts in the present times where a young girl is learning dance with a guru and the girl's fiancé comes and starts getting angry with her. He says that he has told her to stop dancing, otherwise he won't marry her. At this point, a friend of his approaches and takes the man (fiancé) on a fictional journey back in history and they reach the times of Mohenjo-Daro. There he sees the same girl (his fiancée) with whom he had just had a fight. He also sees the figures of yogis, drummers, and others that you see commonly in the reliefs of Mohenjo-Daro. So, the man lives the life of the people of Mohenjo-Daro and discovers that dance and music were very important aspects of that life. Consequently, he comes back a transformed man with very different ideas. This is how I had choreographed *Song of Mohenjo-Daro*, which became very popular and was much talked about because people did not have any idea of these things. And of course, the dancing figurine—the *tribhangi* (three bends) posture of the dancing figurine—and its similarities with the *Odissi* dance form that we practice related to the narrative of *Mohenjo-Daro*. It was an exciting choreographic journey. The second choreography, *Aao Raqs Karo* was based on the poetry of Fahmida Riaz. Fahmida actually wrote parts of the long poem for me. It is in the form of a historical narrative on the changing position of women from the cave times till the present. I had so much wanted to do that kind of work through dance and to discuss how women's position have changed through different stages of life in history.

Priyanka Basu: Recently, we have seen an onslaught directed toward Muslim women in Bangladesh for wearing *bindi* (a Hindu symbol and thus un-Islamic), and on Muslim women in India for wearing the hijab. You have been wearing *saree* and *bindi* throughout your life as a form of protest. How do you see these onslaughts as primarily patriarchal?

Sheema Kermani: It is. It is patriarchal and fundamentalist basically. In Bangladesh women have used the *bindi* on their foreheads since forever and have worn the *saree*. This is true of Muslim women. Suddenly there is an onslaught, which signals the rising fundamentalism that is taking place globally. There is Christian fundamentalism, Hindu fundamentalism in India, Islamic fundamentalism in Muslim countries. I feel for me wearing a *saree* and a *bindi* has always been a part of my identity. It has aided my search for identity in Pakistan, which has always been a multicultural society. That multiculturalism, sadly, is being done away with. When I was growing up in Karachi, I had Christian, Parsi, Hindu and even Jewish students in my class. We have lost all of this diversity over a period of time. It has become so constricted over time, e.g., everybody must dress in the same way, or they must talk in the same way. I find that the whole beauty of this society – the diversity and pluralism – is really lost. Somehow, I have always managed to escape any such attack on my physical being but emotionally and verbally there have been many attacks. People question me if I am a non-Muslim. I reply saying that my parents have always taught me that it is very impolite to ask someone's religion. We grew up with those ideas about respecting people's privacy about their religious choice and identity. My parents were practicing Muslims, but it was a much more open religion that was practiced among that earlier generation of people. There was so much acceptance of every other religion. They were secular people, which meant that you could practice your religion, but you couldn't impose it on anybody else. There was a whole generation of people with such mindset, which we have unfortunately lost now.

Priyanka Basu: 2023 is the 45th anniversary of *Tebrik-e-Niswan*, a leading platform for social activism in Pakistan. Could you tell us about its inception and journey so far, especially with working class women? What are some of its ongoing and upcoming endeavours?

Sheema Kermani: Yes, next year *Tebrik-e-Niswan* completes 45 years, and we are organising a festival to celebrate the event with a retrospective of some of our work and showcasing some new work. When I started *Tebrik-e-Niswan*, the idea was to work with the oppressed of the oppressed, i.e., working class women. We started with conducting lots of adult literacy classes for women. We did vocational centres for women. We initiated health facilities for women. We also worked with working class women in factories by trying to organise them into trade unions. These were the initial initiatives of *Tebrik-e-Niswan*. We created a short play based on the stories of some of the women we were working with. The impact of this play, we felt, was much larger than all the seminars, conferences, talks and workshops that we had been doing over a period of time. Consequently, *Tebrik-e-Niswan* moved on to become a cultural organisation and we decided to use the medium of culture to talk about human rights issues. This first play that we had produced was *Dard Ke Faslay* (Separated by Pain) based on a story by the novelist-poet, Amrita Pritam. The story has two characters—Life (Jaan/Zindagi) and Wind (Hawa)—and it is a conversation between these two characters discussing the lives of women in an area – how these women have not felt that they have been alive or experienced the wind of liberation. It was a symbolic play but still had a huge impact because it had all the elements of music, dance, movements and singing. It was the effect of this play that made us realise that nothing has more impact than a cultural medium of storytelling. Since then, the work of *Tebrik-e-Niswan* as a cultural group has been primarily focussed on telling stories about women (female-oriented). Most of the themes are related to human rights issues. We have also gone beyond theatrical productions – video productions, television plays and mini-series. It is the diversity of this venture into various forms that has helped us sustain as it might be difficult to sustain with one mode of cultural production. It also helps that besides being a dancer, I also work in theatre, television plays or productions by other people – this helps us a lot in sustaining ourselves and *Tebrik-e-Niswan* moving forward.

Priyanka Basu: *Aurat* March has emerged as one of the most recognised mobilisation of women's dissenting voices in Pakistan. How do you see yourself within it as a dancer-activist? What are the threats you have faced and how have you countered them?

Sheema Kermani: It has now been more than 5 years since we started *Aurat* March. The initial idea was borrowed from all the marches that were taking place in other countries such as in the USA and Europe; we felt why shouldn't Pakistan have a women's march of its own? However, it was not an easy task. To get women out on the streets in Pakistan is very tough. Firstly, there is a huge resistance to this concept. Secondly, there is resistance to the fact that women are coming out into the domain of politics and not restricting themselves to smaller niche places such as conferences and seminars. The last women's march that we had was on a very prominent avenue where all the political marches (organised by political parties) take place – a big step for us. I think *Aurat* March has been a very big move for Pakistan. It has brought the dialogues and discourses on women's issues to the mainstream of life where everybody is talking about it. When I started *Tebrik-e-Niswan* on International Women's Day in 1979 people used to ask me why I was organising an event. However, nowadays there are numerous events organised on Women's Day all over Pakistan. The march has become a symbol of women in Pakistan becoming part of the

mainstream politics. While this has been a huge step forward, we have also faced many attacks. Last time we were charged with blasphemy when there weren't any other issues to slam against us. Our videos were manipulated and doctored (other words were put into our mouths) to hold us guilty of being blasphemous. It has been a struggle to continue with the march. We sometimes have staunch right-wing people standing right in front of us with stones in their hands to pelt at us. However, I must say that in Karachi *Aurat* March has been very lucky to have the support of the provincial government. The government has been very helpful, supportive, allowed us to take this march out and provided us with security. It is also because we have the PPP⁴ government here, which is in a sense the most liberal of all the governments we have had. On the contrary, women's marches in places like Islamabad and Lahore face a lot of resistances. We have also had very strong women's leadership in PPP such as Benazir Bhutto and Sherry Rehman – educated, forward-looking women who have been part of the political mainstream. These women have always supported women's march. The point now, however, is that where does *Aurat* March go from here and what is its future. The idea for most of us was that at some point women would become part of the mainstream politics, administration and governance of the country. Sadly, we are still nowhere near any of these. In fact, gender-based violence has increased hugely in Pakistan in the last many years. It is not just in one city but all over Pakistan. Although we make such a noise about it, we protest, we come out on the streets, it is written about, there is no improvement. Actually, the state has to implement the laws and see to it that the perpetrators are punished. Unfortunately, that does not happen. Those who are the perpetrators of violence on women, they hardly ever get punished. They always seem to be able to get away with it. The last time the Prime Minister of Pakistan, Mr. Imran Khan, made some remarks about women; comments such as if women wear short dresses they will be raped. If the leadership is so misogynist, obviously then these ideas penetrate the society hugely and it becomes more and more difficult. I think we still have a very long way to go regarding women's rights issues and for equality for women. But at least, the discourse has started and every family, home, kitchen talks about *Aurat* March – why are these women marching, what do they want? Bringing this discourse at the forefront has been a huge step in itself.

Priyanka Basu: What are the challenges that your male and female students face as dancers? How are their performances restricted to safe spaces?

Sheema Kermani: I would say that in the last couple of years (due to the pandemic), dance student numbers have really gone down. The second time when the Taliban took over Afghanistan and its effect spread over Pakistan, it aggravated the religious fundamentalism in our country – this really affected the arts and artists hugely. It is hard to get audiences for our dance performances during times of political instability. Families would not send their children to learn dance and it is also difficult for them to access public transport to come to the dance schools. In the last three years COVID-19 has also impacted this situation, more so because I felt that I was not comfortable teaching online. The internet facilities are intermittent and not all students have access to them. How do you teach students who do not have laptops or live in areas where there is no electricity most of the times due to huge power cuts? I think the arts have suffered a lot in the last three years. There was only one *arangetram* performance (formal entry to stage performances) that took place in these three years. This performance also took place in Alliance Française as it is one of the safest spaces as a cultural centre. It is also one of those spaces where you can avoid those people who can potentially harm us. So, it has not been easy at all, and it is not going to be easy in the future also because in reality there is no support for the arts whatsoever, especially for the classical arts. Unless you get some kind of support from the state and the government, these arts are going to die. This is one of my fears in Pakistan that classical arts are actually dying. We really cannot say that there are many students who are taking it up seriously primarily because they feel that what are they going to do with it. One cannot make any money out of it! Secondly, you also don't get respect or a respectable position in society by taking up dance as a profession. So, why would anybody want to become a dancer in this country? There is of course, a lot of hard work that goes into becoming a dancer. Above all, there is a constant attack – what you are doing is not Pakistani and not Muslim. I really feel that classical dance is going to perish away in Pakistan as I don't see a future for it. There are also no venues to perform. I feel that I have really pushed the boundaries by performing in different venues, including conferences. I have really pushed to bring it to a popular level so that people can get opportunities to watch it because I feel that this is the only way in which you can popularise this art. People praise the beauty of the art form when they are able to watch it. However, when it is not accessible to them, how will they appreciate art? There are so many private television channels in Pakistan but not one of them has any classical dance programme. Not one of them has a classical music programme for that matter. Can you believe it? When PTV – the national channel of Pakistan – started, classical music programmes would be aired every day. There are no classical music programmes now. So, all of these are indicative of the fact that the classical arts are dying and there are very few people who

⁴ The Pakistan People's Party is a centre-left socialist-democratic party formed in 1967 under the chairmanship of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto.

are managing to keep them going. If there are going to be no venues, no performances, no stage functions, no government and political support, then how are they going to survive? It is sustainable if we keep trying at our individual levels as we cannot take them very far. I do have a studio and space to mentor, but what is going to happen to that space and to my students when I am no more there? I think I have been trying very hard to find some support to set up a cultural centre, but nobody is interested in the initiative. Bangladesh is much better than Pakistan in nurturing dance. There is a sensibility there that these art forms are needed for the society. We don't have that sensibility that dance and music are important for the life of a society. It keeps society vibrant, but there seems to be the attitude here that there is no need for dance and music in our country. I feel disturbed by this attitude – it is a dead society without the arts.

Priyanka Basu: Do you think that dancers can then transition to television shows? Television is a huge medium in Pakistan. Is it possible for dancers to switch over to television? For example, with the global acclaim and viral status of 'Pasoori' in Coke Studio Season 14⁵, you have often been recognised as the 'Pasoori dancer'. Does this recognition through television and digital media contribute to your dance activism? How do you use social media such as Facebook and Instagram in your social work and activism?

Sheema Kermani: When I was first offered to dance in 'Pasoori', I was doubtful about it. I felt why should I be doing this as my lifetime's work has been totally different in terms of classical dance. But now when I look at what 'Pasoori' has managed to do in this one year, I realise that it has brought dance to another section of the society who had no familiarity with dance. Now, they talk about it – is the woman dancing in 'Pasoori' a classical dancer? So, it has raised the issue in a different way, and it has brought dance up to another kind of dialogue. I am actually happy that this has happened. Even if it has happened in a pop music genre, people are watching and discussing that dance is a possibility on television and the screen. I am sure there are other programmes as well where people have started including and introducing dance in their content. Yes, television is huge in Pakistan and there are a large number of channels. They do show dance, but it is a filmy Bollywood and pop style of dancing. There is no dialogue or discussion on that platform on classical dance and it does not look like there is a possibility towards it in the near future. One can just keep hoping and trying for the best. But the fact that so many people have seen 'Pasoori' on television and social media and are talking about it, I do think that it is social media that needs to be credited for achieving this. We just need to recognise and use this in a more positive way. Hopefully it will happen someday.

Priyanka Basu: What are your experiences of performing outside conventional spaces such as performing *dhamaal* at a Sufi shrine commemorating the victims of the Sehwan bomb attack, or performing in the streets? How do people respond to them, both men and women?

Sheema Kermani: The Sehwan bomb attack⁶ was one of the most tragic events and when I went to the site to perform *dhamaal* there, it was taken in the most positive spirit. I got responses from people from all walks of life and even with diverse religious backgrounds in support of that performance event. Everyone felt that *dhamaal* is a part of our history, heritage, and culture. Someone decided to keep the continuity of this performance form because that is what they were trying to break through the bomb attack. Ours is a very complex society. On the one hand we feel that people are going to support this but on the other hand we also feel that nobody is going to do anything about it. It is a complex situation, and it is not easy to understand or explain as to what is happening in these countries. How do you navigate this complexity to understand why people support you when you are performing in 'Pasoori' or performing *dhamaal* at the shrine? Nobody opposes you when you perform a dance at an Altaf Hussain Hali (Urdu poet) conference. I have performed in front of *lakhs* of people in these venues and continue to do that as often as I can.

It is a difficult issue. On the one hand I do say that these art forms are dying but I also find myself performing at these events and people not opposing even.

⁵ Coke Studio is a Pakistani television music series bringing together renowned and emerging artists from the country on an international platform. The series foregrounds different genres of music including classical, folk, hip hop and others. In Season 14 (curated by Zulfiqar Jabbar Khan), 13 vocal artists were showcased in a revamped musical and aesthetic setup. 'Pasoori' emerged as one of the foremost of the music videos of Season 14.

⁶ The Sehwan suicide bombing took place on 16 February 2017 at the shrine of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar in Sindh, Pakistan killing a large number of people and injuring hundreds. The bombing took place at the event of a Sufi ritual performance (*dhamaal*), and in protest against the attack activists re-performed the *dhamaal* at the site a few days later.



Figure 2. Sheema Kermani in ‘Mujh Mae Tou Moujood’, a theatrical play about a Sufi singer and dancer at Arts Council of Pakistan, Karachi (2021). © *Tebrik-e-Niswan*.

Priyanka Basu: There is a pressing need now for collaboration among artists in the Global South, especially South Asia since that dialogue is very important. This is an unprecedented time for the world, and more so for the Global South in terms of the devastating effects of climate crisis – the recent floods in Pakistan being a major example. How important do you think that this collaboration is necessary? How are you rethinking your social work and dance/choreographies to address the issue of climate crisis?

Sheema Kermani: I think this collaboration is extremely necessary and I think the way we have lived these 75 years (since independence) by dividing ourselves—India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka—we need to start rethinking our identities. We need to think of ourselves as South Asians rather than as Pakistanis, Indians, or Bangladeshis. That will make a lot of difference. The fact is that we do have and celebrate similarities in our cultures. For instance, my mother would feel closer to somebody from south India than to somebody from Punjab. These kinds of feelings exist. We have tried to ignore those feelings and have tried to submerge our identities totally. I think it is time to rethink and restart all of that so that we can come together as part of the Global South and celebrate our diversities and similarities at the same time. That is the only way in which we will be able to exist in harmony with each other. This is what we need to do otherwise we are dead countries and societies. ‘Nation-states’ is a useless concept today in the world. As far as climate change is concerned, we in Pakistan are seeing such a huge effect of climate change today. In Karachi, every day is different weatherwise because of climate change. The kind of unpredictability of weather that is taking place, the way glaciers are melting, there is stark water crisis in Pakistan and what will happen to the water situation very soon – these are urgent questions that need intervention. What will happen very soon to the population of these countries and how will we survive are of grave concern. I think we need to start thinking as one group of people who can only survive if we consider ourselves not enemies of each other. I do think arts play a huge role in all of this.

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