



Meaning of Violence in Khalid Ahmad's Come and See My City From Here

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Khalid Ahmad's play 'Come and See My City From Here' offers a searing examination of violence both internal and external that pervades the socio-cultural fabric of Karachi. By blending scripted text with improvisation drawn from actors' lived experiences and real news reports, the play collapses the boundaries between performance and reality. Violence manifests not merely as physical brutality such as parental loss, police torture, rape, gang warfare but also as psychological trauma, moral decay and existential despair, entrenched across gender and communal lines. Characters like Munna, driven from shyness to bloodlust, and Nasir (Asad), whose guilt over murder and social marginalization culminates in suicide, highlight how systemic injustice and frustration distort human identity. The play's portrayal of partition-era massacre alongside contemporary ethnic strife underscores the cyclical nature of communal violence. Even the seemingly minor act of teasing a wounded dog gestures at entrenched cruelty. Through evocative scenes from children mocking violence to women punished for seeking justice, the play insists that violence operates at structural and personal levels, echoing Karachi's enduring turmoil. Ahmad's work, thus, dramatizes violence as a force that corrodes society, memory and morality, urging audiences to confront its omnipresence in both public and intimate spheres.

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The play 'Come And See My City From Here' is a dramatic exploration of the violence going on within people and outside in the society. Even the structure of the play is provided by its rootedness in the violence-infested contemporary society. It is about the continuing history of violence in Karachi (in Pakistan since 1947). Its title has been derived from a Faiz Ahmed Faiz poem "If You Look At The City From Here", the lines include as follows:

You cannot tell whether you see
a group of revelers or mourners
in the shadows dancing around the distant lamps
and from hair you cannot tell
whether the colour streaming down the walls
is that of blood or roses.

This poem was written in 1965. The distinction between blood and roses has become all the more blurred in the present day Karachi. In Asif Aslam Farrukhi's words, "Pakistan's largest city, which Pride itself on being a veritable cosmopolitan metropolis, the "city of bright lights", has become, in recent year, the scene of horrible ethnic violence fuelled by partnerships

between the words of high politics and crime financed by drug money. The glittering neon lights of the city are circulated by dark shadows, the fastering contradictions which perpetuate a vicious cycle of crime and violence.”. The present paper is an attempt to gauge the moods of anguish, anger and disillusionment, which result in violence, and its result so amply reflected in the narrative of Khalid Ahmed’s play.

The play is constructed in such a way that it is very difficult, rather impossible to decide whether it is theatre of the Absurd or the Theatre of Cruelty. Or it points to a kind of total theatre in which the entire city space becomes a stage. In this sense, the play subsumes life as life eventually subsumes all kinds of “plays”. It can be distinguish where real life ceases and the play begins, or the streaming colour stops being a rose and begins to ooze out blood. The raw, real life situations faced by the characters are the basis on which the place stands and acquire its shape. “Everything in it is drawn either from actual newspaper accounts or from the personal experiences of the actors who participated in Khalid’s theatre workshops,” As Alok Bhalla tells in the “Editor’s Note”. Thus we can call the play as structurally innovative in each new production, the playwright invite the actors to draw upon their own experience and their knowledge of history of torment, violence in their own community. That’s why the play is both written text and an improvisation. But whether from the writer's side or from the actors’ side being a part of an improvisation, the violence is the one which is being produced in the whole play.

The play, as the title suggests is a kind of invitation to see and feel the unmaking of a nation, that means all the disastrous things like violence, corruption hatred etc. are rending apart the nation- the Pakistan of 1990's. A nation is based on the edifice of peace, love, understanding and more such things but these very salencies of a nation are missing in the trouble-trauma-torn Karachi-which may metaphorically mean the Pakistan of today.

Khalid Ahmad has chosen a few characters for his play, "Come And See My City From Here" but they all taken from different communities to show the effect of the destruction, the violence on people of Pakistan. The Director and some actors - Tariq returned from abroad in search of the same city which he left twelve years ago; Zara, returned from America and frustrated with the society especially with her father; Sadia who is a social worker associated with the "Women for Self-Help Group", is the only way of hope for this society; Saleem and Sohail, two tramps of the street; Urfi, a shy little boy; and Asad, an unemployed person who is actually Nasir, a kidnapper. There is an old man, his wife, his son, Hasan and daughter Adeela. Munna, Samina and Saeed Bobby are "hidden" characters which are being played by the actors during their improvisations.

The very first scene of the play shows the Director and some of the actors, planning to enact a play about the condition of their city. The actors are reading news about violence in the city from newspapers and the director is taking notes from it for his play. The improvisation acted by Saleem and Sohail in which Sohail strangles Saleem with an imaginary rope, is very much terrifying. When the director and the actors introduce each other, an old man, an old woman, his wife, their teen-age son, Hasan, and a teen-age daughter, Adeela, enter because they are afraid of the firing outside. At the end of Scene-I, Director asks to the actors:

I want some of you to act out a violent scene.
Something strong... something that you haven't
forgotten since your childhood... something
that's still very clear in your mind (Scene 1,
p.87).

The actors act as children who tease a wounded dog in a very cruel way. This is really a scene full of violence which is a reflection of the violence outside. In Scene II, Sohail asks

the director for a pistol and then for a holster because "... he (Saleem) wants to strap a holster under his shirt and walk in front of the girls school. Girls get terribly impressed" (Scene II, p.88). What a terrific way to impress the girls! The worst scene of the society's decreased values is when as Sadia tells about an eleven years old girl who is being raped, but since she can't prove it, she has been charged instead and sentenced to prison. Sadia, as a social worker, takes signs of all the actors in a petition demanding her release. At this highest point of cruelty, everybody reacts with surprise. As:

ZARA : My God, this is barbaric/

TARIQ: There is a limit to backwardness and cruelty. (Scene II, p. 89)

AND

DIRECTOR: O God, I don't know what century they are taking us back to (Scene II, p.89)

When everybody as busy in talking and enjoying their meeting, Asad is the one who is feeling awkward. But Sadia tries to talk with him. At that moment Asad expresses his frustrations about the society!

SADIA: (To Asad) What are you thinking about, sitting here alone?

ASAD: I was thinking that I should not have come here,

SADIA: Why?

ABAD: I am out of place here. In any case how can a play help?

SADIA: Its just another front. That's all.

ASAD: Front against what?

SADIA: Front against barbarism. (Scene II, p.90)

From this part of conversation, the purpose of the writing of the play is obvious, the play becomes an instrument to exposed the horrors of terrorism, violence, crime and corruption in the contemporary society. The state-sponsored- terrorism has also been condemned in the play. Here, the police stands for the state. The police is searching for Hasan's brother Munna, murderer and when they can't find him, take Hasan at the police station and torture him badly. This shows that an innocent is being tortured only on the basis of having a relation to the culprit.

Now the playwright shows the violence after the Partition in 1947 through an improvisation played by the actors. It is about the Hindu-Muslim riots. Both of these communities were killing each other's men with brutality and cruelty. This improvisation is about a lady with her one-year old child. She ties her child with a tree in a lonely place as she is frightened and out of breath: "Stay here, don't cry. I will soon be back. my darling." (Scene III, p. 92). But some people arrive at that place and after finding the child- a Muslim, they hack him to Death. This improvisation of a violent scene is true because thousands of people were killed in Partition. This scene is really violent as now brutally the people took a little and Innocent child's life who had just come into the world. What wrong has the child done to them?

The playwright purposely juxtaposes the two situations of violence in the play -i.e. . the massacre of the fleeing people during the Partition and the cold-blooded killings of innocent people in the present-day Pakistan. Khalid Ahmad seems to here raised an important and troubling question - Why wasn't the ethnic violence which could be, with some crude logic, justified in the context of Partition over as yet?? What makes, in other words, a muslim kill another Muslim in the present day Pakistan?

Another interesting yet symbolic tale - shows how an Innocent and effeminate character "Munna" is transformed into a dreaded gangster and criminal-bee because of the prevailing atmosphere of violence and corruption. The people, especially young and unemployed people

have taken the path of violence like Munna. Munna is the elder son of the old man. In Hasan's words:

He had some strange Traits. He was very shy,
Excessively, like a girl. Didn't know how to move
with people. . . Always sat alone. . . quietly. . . So
much so that it had become a joke... When other
boys made fun of him, he merely sat with his head
bowed. He didn't want to go to school.
Didn't want to study. Didn't even have a friend.

(Scene-111, p.94).

But in Adeela's views (his sister's views), he had more courage than others. She tells about an incident when Hasan's friends came at home and said filthy words about Samine, to whom Munna used to love, he couldn't tolerate this and became furious and violent. He grabbed hold of one of Hasan's friends and pushed him. At this violent act of his, Hasan's friends ran away. At another place, when the firing was going on outside, Munna was sitting at home as his mother was very caring about him. Murina's brother and cousin made fun of him and told him that he should wear bangles since he was worse than a girl. At this, suddenly, he jumped up and ran out and did something so brave that the attackers ran away and he became the hero overnight. People started treating him with fear and respect. And after this there was no looking back for him. He became a murderer now. The very act of his brutality is when he cut off Dinoo's tongue for opening his mouth against him.

When the director decides to make Munna's story as the subject of the play, he asks for suggestions to take the story forward. Asad, who is actually Nasir, knows the real story of Munna but he doesn't want to disclose his identity and so tells the story of Munna as he is guessing it. After cutting Dinco's tongue Munna had become very violent according to Asad:

After that Munna couldn't escape violence. Because
he decided that he would never allow anyone to
laugh at him again. Violence became a need. . . his
inner need. . . he craved for it, like an addict
craves for alcohol. He snatched it away from
others... for himself. Wanted it all for himself.
And each time in greater quantities.

(Scene-IV, p.99)

It is therefore, of clear that unabated growth "violence", becomes a "need" in the present-day Pakistan. When the actors do the improvisation of this story, Munna's mother comes in and becomes historical by saying 'he was not like that'. At this, Asad shouts and tells the reality about the brutality of Munna:

He is crazy. . . goes mad at the sight of
victim. . . And let me tell you something more. . .
Your son is not satisfied with inflicting small
tortures. Do you know what his favorite pastime
is? He beats up his victim till he bleeds all over
and then he makes the victim lie down on hot dry
sand. Then he rubs some medicine on his body so
that the sand becomes hard. And then he scratches
it with a piece of tin foil . . . and goes on
scratching and scratching . . . and the victim

screams with pain...

(Scene-IV, p. 100)

This story of Munna is the height of cruelty and brutality. It is full of violence. At every step, every act of his, we feel the very barbarism. Even Asad becomes historical wasio telling the story of his brutality. When Asad is being identified as Nasir, he tells his purpose of coming to the theatre and that is to tell the people about his doing the first and last murder of an innocent eleven ears old girl whom he has kidnapped. Because the girl has seen is "secret" diary and the police has surrounded him, there was no other option left to him than to kill her. He has done this in a state of bewilderment and not in his conscience. He is basically good person at heart and that's why he separated himself from Multifias group whose way was very crude, ugly, barbaric and inhuman. Then he tells his own story of being adopted the way of violence. His clerk father had some dreams about him to get a respectable job and so he used to push him to study day and night. But after completing the study Nasir couldn't get any job and he realised that his education was of no use. So he became Frustrated. And the death of his father, because the VIP's were passing away, more to his frustration and gave disappointments. After this he started taking revenge on the whole society in a violent manner.

So the story of Nasir is really a sad story of the unemployed youth in Pakistan who adopt the way of violence due to frustration. And this violence is again the result of the violence done to them. "Violence breeds violence", but violence is not only physical pain and bloodshed but of mental harassment also. As Nasir explains one incident:

. . . Once I was walking on the road after one such
interview, . . . A Pajero went past, drenching me
with muddy slush from head to foot, and the guards
sitting in the Pajero, who had guns in their hands,
roared with laughter. Isn't that violence?

(Scene-V, p.103).

After both these stories of Munna and Nasir, Samina's story is being told. Sadia comes to know by the help of her group that Samina and her little child died. She(Samina) has become Munna's wife and Saeed Bobby, an enemy of Munna has raped, her. When she went to police station to file a report about the rape, the policemen dragged her, put her in the lock-up and even tried to seduce her. As the playwright tells:

. . . they tell her that unless she can prove she was
raped, she will be charged with "Zina" and would
have to stay here, . . . then a senior officer comes
- looks lustfully at Samina...

Scene-VII, p. 109)

But luckily she escaped from the police-station and again fell in the hands of Saeed Bobby and his group. She was told that Munna had died. When they tried to rape again, she killed her child and stabbed herself with a knife. This story of Samina indicates the brutality of the people as well as of the police, representing the state, towards a helpless woman. Khalid Ahmad shows here the insecurity of people, especially of women. Even the department of police who claims for the security of people. have become the reason for the insecurity of the people! This is really the worst condition of a nation.

In Scene-VIII, Zara tells about the brutality of her father in his past. He was the nexus between politics and crime. He used to torture people and even give orders to kill people. So, not only the frustrated class, but the ruling class is also full of violence, and brutality. Infact, the later one is the Source of this violence. In the last scene of the play, Asad takes permission forcibly to play the role of Munna about his murder. He tells that Saeed Bobby and group

torture Munna about the money. But when the boy, who gives food to him, tells that his wife and child are no more, Munna wants a pistol to kill himself.

Asad in the role of Munna asks for a pistol, but when the director advises him to mime it, Asad takes a pistol out of his pocket and places it on his forehead and shoots and falls down. It is all happening during the improvisation. Everybody takes it lightly as he was doing only acting. But when the director asks that the newspapers have said about Munna's doing suicide he doesn't respond. Then they go to Asad to know the reality, and come to know that Asad actually killed himself.

This last scene shocks us as Asad alias Nasir ends his life because he is feeling guilty of murdering Bibi, the eleven years old girl. Here the playwright presents the uncertainty of the life of the youths in Pakistan. How pathetic their condition Even they don't know the aim of their lives and on which path they should walk. They don't have a proper guidance. Their lives are being wasted in this violence and corruption-based society.

Thus the play shows that there is violence spreaded in the whole society. The actors become violent during the improvisations and their talking. Through this play we come to know of the barbaric atmosphere in Karachi. The youths are taking the wrong path due to frustration and do everything which is full of violence. As Zara tells, about her would be fiancée's and his friend's playing the game of colliding their cars into each other's. When Tariq goes to his old college, he comes to know that the final result has come out and that's why the students are celebrating it by firing in the air. What a terrific way of celebrating ! and moreover people get used to it. It is worthwhile to remember that many Pakistani contemporary writers have highlighted the same situations, same problems in their writings as Khalid Ahmed. Zeeshan Sahil, a leading young poet, writes in his poem "Firing":

Firing is on
Firing is on
The children, while playing cricket,
Run after the ball,
Make noises
But do not go home,
As Firing is an experimental folk song
On the tune of which
While making noises and running
Cricket can be played
To teach the children counting
A new method
They daily, one to ten,
Ten to hundred
And then without any break
Reach from hundred to thousand
But the firing doesn't stop
It continuously goes on.....

Another important poet, Afzal Ahmad Sayyad says in one of his poems, "We Want More And More Flowers":

"He want more and more flowers
To put on the toes of the dead ones.
He want more and more flowers
To cover the faces of the dead bodies which are
founded in the gunny sacks."

The poet wants to convey here that even the flowers are not enough to cover the dead bodies. This is the worst situation one can suppose. So because this violence is all around in the society, it has become most of the contemporary writers' main concern in their writings. Thus, Khalid Ahmads play "Come And See My City From Here" is a telling analysis of the violence-ridden Pakistan which seems to stand on the edge of disaster and disintegration. The fear of death seems to haunt all the characters like their real life counterparts. And what is even worse, is the growing apathy and, indifference to this macabre cult of violence in the contemporary Pakistan.