

# **Talking Under-talked Issues: An Interview with Pakistani Author Fatima A. Maan**

**by Yumin Ao**

Fatima A. Maan comes from Lahore, Pakistan. She graduated with a double BA degree in Theater and Economics at New York University Abu Dhabi and is pursuing her MFA in playwriting at Boston University. As a playwright, she constantly questions the nationalism and patriarchal notions she was raised on and unpacks everyday Pakistani socio-political issues through her work. Her ultimate goal is to create theater that addresses underrated social problems, encourages audiences to think critically, and leads to a more progressive and self-reflexive Pakistani society.

# Fatima A. Maan



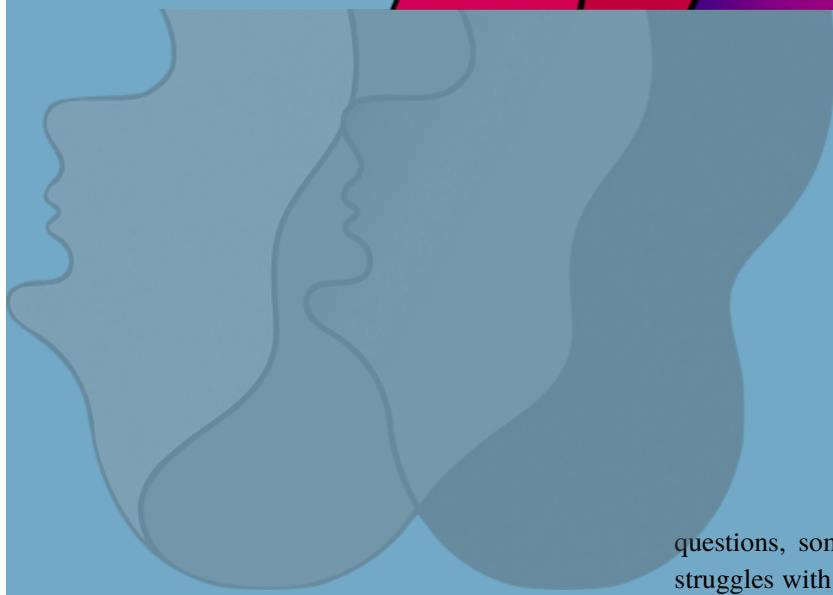
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She is the author of *Humera* and presented it at the third “Queer” Asia Conference 2018 in London. *Humera* chronicles a chapter on the lives of three Pakistani teenagers from differing religious, cultural, and economic backgrounds. It questions the treatment and perception of religious and sexual minorities across the social strata of modern-day Pakistan. It explores how the youth view these topics in light of the clash between their religious education (passed on to them by their parents and society) and their more open-minded and ambiguous interplay with peers. Filled with dark humor, *Humera* offers a snapshot of shifting mindsets, inner conflict, and taboos around spirituality and love.

Fatima received a fellowship from the International Forum of the Berliner Theatertreffen 2022. As one of the 34 fellows, she watched Theatertreffen’s productions and participated in workshops, discussions, excursions, and artists’ talks. In the interview during the festival, she shared with *the Journal of Ying Ming Theater* (hereafter YMT) her entry into theatrical arts, her play writings, her experiences with Berliner Theatertreffen, and her views about theater events in Pakistan.

Fatima explains to the YMT why and how the theater is a medium for her to understand such social issues as political turmoil, mistreatment of women, religious minority communities, sexual and gender minorities, etc. These issues frustrated her when she came across them. At that time, Fatima was a college student and couldn’t figure out the right way to get things done. She found the theater allowed her to ask questions and do things differently. “I have always wanted to work on projects with social impact,” she said, “and this was my entry into theater arts.”

The motivation to make the best out of bad situations has become not that conspicuous over time, which doesn’t mean as a drama writer, she has less ambition than before. Her direction remains the same, and she continues writing about social-political issues in Pakistan, particularly about queer people of color. But she has started finding joy within it instead of focusing on the concern “I must do something with this, or I have to make a difference.” Her understanding and relationship with the theater have changed but certainly deepened with work. Overwhelmingly, her dramas very much ask



questions, sometimes including questions in which she struggles with herself. She asks what future Pakistan has, whether Pakistan has ever been a safe place for women and if Pakistanis will be able to find ways to get out of cyclical intergenerational trauma. She believes patriarchy is not just something enforced by men but also something carried on the shoulders of women, so she asks if people can break out of those cycles.

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## JHAANJAR PAANWAN CHHA

The American premiere of one  
of the first LGBT plays ever  
performed in Pakistan!

By **FATIMA MAAN**  
Directed by **NICKY MAGGIO**





Directed by Nicky Maggio  
Written by Fatima Maan  
Based on “Butterflies are Free” by Leonard Gershe

Scenic Design by Riw Rakkulchon  
Costume Design by Jules Peiperl  
Lighting Design by Leslie Gray  
Sound Design by Chris Darbassie  
Production Stage Manager: Jiawen Hu

Featuring: Arjun Dhawan, Danish Farooqui, Uma Paranjpe, & Mahima Saigal

Photos by Jess Orense & Sean Velasco-Dodge

J H A A N J A R



DI PAANWAN CHHANKAAR

Unlike her friends from India, where music and dance were part of their upbringing, as Fatima tells the YMT, she had huge difficulty convincing her parents that she wanted to do art. The overwhelming Pakistani Islamic narrative is not conducive to art. There is a contentious issue about whether art should be allowed there. It is not an issue of utility for the upper middle class who can afford to go to concerts or theaters; rather, it is an issue of wanting. The scope of arts becomes limited, but Fatima believes it doesn't necessarily say art is not thriving in some way. The music industry is doing exceptionally well nowadays

Fatima applied for the fellowship through the Goethe Institute in Pakistan two years ago. She submitted her resume with a statement to elaborate on the social-political relevance of her work. She was one of the recipients of the fellowship in 2020. Because of the enforcement of pandemic regulations in Germany, the organizer postponed the forum to 2022. In Berlin, she had an intensive program lasting for two and a half weeks. She attended workshops, watched all the ten selected productions, and discussed these performances based on her reflections. One of the workshops she participated in was on crises. It was discussion-oriented and about

## **... is not conducive to art.**

in Pakistan. People come up with such platforms as YouTube that theoretically everyone can use. But, it is gendered because women don't have as much access to technology as men do. Moreover, it is harder to facilitate theater than music. There are some performing artists doing excellent work but in a certain way, and their work is different from that of people in the West.

how people could utilize these crises as a means to continue to work. On weekends, she joined other fellows for brunches and to network with representatives of the Goethe Foundations in London, Jordan, etc.

## **It is an issue of wanting.**

# **... getting more in touch with the core of my life journey is a progressive art**

Fatima expresses to the YMT her idea about making progressive art in the 21st century, a thematic question proposed at Berliner Theatertreffen 2022. She says that she would more like to think about progress in a personal way. Her work is intimately related to the crisis she is dealing with, things making her upset, angry, and passionate. She says, “getting more in touch with the core of my life journey is a progressive art.” She adds it is fantastic if her work can help people think hard, but she has stopped pondering she needs to make progress. Instead, she has learned to do specific work in theater, which makes her feel fulfilled as an artist.

Fatima thinks it is hard to talk about their problems in a place where most of its people live frustrating life. Islam in Pakistan is often used to gain political power, which adds tension and frustration to people. Her observation of society allows her to understand how the facets of society impact people. She is currently working on an intergenerational play that is the thesis for her master's. It is about how a grandmother, a mother, and a daughter hurt each other. It tells how they articulate their discomfort and take steps to remedy these issues. It describes their engagement in the life of one and the changes in their expectations of the other.

# **... to find ways to get out of cyclical intergenerational trauma**

Another work is a solo play about a female cat explaining to her kitten how she got pregnant by a male cat without consent. Sexual violence is not a random affair addressed in Pakistani society. Her investigation is specific and intimate. She explores for herself and writes for herself. If people can relate to themselves, to their mothers, sisters, or daughters when they read the work, she thinks that is the biggest reward for her as a writer. She believes what she needs to do is to keep on writing for herself and about her discomfort and passion.

In the end, Fatima looks back at the development of theater arts in Pakistan. She tells the YMT that Shahid Nadeem is the father figure of Pakistani theater. He started Ajoka Theater with his wife in the 1980s when the country was under a military dictatorship and Islamization was introduced intensively. Islamization became an intake part of the national fabric. Since then, different political parties have continuously used it to control people. Madeeha Gauhar, Shahid's wife, stepped up to make a theater company to ask

social-political questions and contend with state responsibilities. They produced remarkable works, majorly the backyard or street theater at that time. They were recognized in the fields of theater, TV, and also in local communities. After Gauhar passed away, Shahid operated the theater company and transformed it into Ajoka institute, which offers multiple acting courses and workshops to pass acting skills on. Other than that, Pakistanis haven't yet established a complete theater structure.

There are some theater companies in other cities, for instance, OLOMOPOLO Media which Fatima works with in Lahore. The operating expenses of a theater company may come from commercial sponsorships, funding opportunities provided by foreign country embassies in Pakistan, and grants from progressive organizations. She received generous funding from the Embassy of the Netherland to write a play representing LGPTQ voices in Pakistan. The source supported the production team in touring to perform her work in different cities. ■

Image © justlgbtthings

Ajoka is a non-profit voluntary, democratic organization. Its members come from varied classes and social backgrounds.

It is committed to gender equality and equal rights for all irrespective of class, gender, ethnic or religious affinities. It actively supports peace and friendship in the world, especially in South Asia.

Ajoka attaches great importance to developing close relations with civil society, human rights groups and community organizations. It has collaborated with women's rights, environmental, workers, children and human rights organizations on issues of common interest.



Images © Ajoka

OLOMOPOLO's objective is to enhance the value of **VISUAL, PERFORMING, and MEDIA ART** as a tool for social sensitization and social advocacy for public awareness of their ethical development and socio-cultural sophistication.



**Both sit in silence for a while**