

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the concept of the Absurdist-I in the works of Punjabi playwrights by examining its manifestation in the performance of two contemporary plays: *Kuch Naa Kaho* (Don't Speak!) and *Aakhri Show* (The Last Show). The notion of Absurdist-I intersects with three major theoretical frameworks: Lacan's concept of the Ideal-I at the mirror stage, Raymond Williams' Cultural Materialism, and the neocolonial paradigm of theatre in post-colonial Pakistani Punjab. It is crucial to note that Absurdist-I, as explored in this study, is distinct from the Absurdist theatre of Martin Esslin. While Esslin's Theatre of the Absurd focuses on the existentialist themes of meaninglessness and the human condition, the Absurdist-I here pertains to a fragmented identity shaped by cultural and societal forces. This research contends that neocolonial forces have significantly influenced Pakistani discourse and power structures, utilizing theatre as a tool to cultivate an ethos that undermines indigenous artistic agency, thereby distorting the meaning of self and identity. Consequently, an Absurdist-I emerges from this travestied identity, as opposed to the Ideal-I in Lacanian terms. The study delves into two facets of the Absurdist-I: the first being the plight of Punjabi playwrights such as Babu Baraal, who, pressured by neocolonial forces, attempt to escape their authentic identity and adopt a pretended one, ultimately failing due to internal conflict. The second dimension concerns the playwright Mirza Athar Baig, who, despite writing in Urdu for decades, harbors a suppressed desire to express himself in Punjabi. Baig's *Aakhri Show* represents an effort to reclaim the Punjabi identity lost amidst hyper-globalized, neoliberal, and corporate environments. This research explores how the protagonists of these plays experience the Absurdist-I and how the shattered mirror-image of the Absurdist-I leads to the emergence of the Ideal-I. This study aims to theorize a dynamic Punjabi identity and systematize the discursive resistance against the hegemonic forces of the neocolonial status quo.

Key Words: Absurdist-I, Ideal-I, Cultural Materialism, Neocolonial Ethos, Identity, Performance