

THEATRE VS. SOCIAL CHANGE ADVOCACY: *MY NAME IS RACHEL CORRIE* VS. *MY NAME IS ...*

**Introduction**

Initially, plays simply provided people with ‘bread and circuses’ to entertain them instead of being concerned with political affairs and problems. Further, theatre has incorporated the features of progressive thinking that is beyond prejudices and stereotypes and entices the masses to improve their lives. This essay discusses to what extent theatre can be a means for advocacy of social change by examining the two plays, *My Name Is Rachel Corrie* and *My Name Is...* These modern examples of theatrical art present two distinct problems that bother the minds of millions people worldwide in the intersection of West-to-East relations. Hence, after examining of the theoretical background of the set question, the paper aims to investigate the elements that show either implicit or explicit calls of these plays for a change in human mindset and true understanding of acute and topical issues of global significance.

**Theorists about Advocacy of Social Change in Theatre**

Past and present theorists and practitioners in the field have tended to believe that through well-organised and properly formulated messages that are embodied in “artistic transformations on the stage,” “society itself can be changed”. In addition, theatre allows the audience an opportunity of continuity of shared social memory, namely, change should be of long-term effects if this strategy if implemented effectively. In this respect, an American film director and animator Tim Miller stresses that “the real-time heat of live performing is an especially handy crucible for raising awareness and provoking people to action”. Thus, the function of theatre aimed at evoking change-centred attitudes seems to be clearly articulated by the scholars.

On the other hand, these theories are thoroughly devastated as soon as the issue concerns long-lasting opposition between the Orient and Occident worldviews and their impacts of the flow of history. Knowles aptly notes that this differentiation has “split the world into a ‘west and the rest’ binary that is both fundamental and problematic”. The latter is thoroughly present in the two plays under analysis. For this reason, the practical extent to which theatre may actually advocate for a social change can be either questionable or limited.

### ***My Name Is Rachel Corrie***

The story of Rachel Corrie is narrated through her testimonies embedded in the emails and diary notes that she wrote during her volunteering trip to Palestine. From the start of the play, she explicitly states, “I’m building the world myself”, and this motto is felt in every remark or thought of the protagonist throughout the play. In a quest for understanding the essence of Israeli-Palestine conflict, she attempts to meet “the underlying need to go to a place and meet people who are on the other end of tax money that goes to fund the US army”. With her eyes wide open, the audience sees a perspective of this other side to have an idea what it is like to be a refugee in own country, live in a half-ruined house in neighbourhood with tanks and bulldozers, and be worried about governmental problems in the US or the UK highlighted by the media at the same time. Revealing these issues to the world, she dies under the press of bulldozer while trying to protect a house of one of the locals from destruction.

### **Perception of the Play**

To say the least, this real-life play has been controversially perceived by the public. On the one hand, critics tried to be careful in making judgements based on the fact that the performance was a memorial of an American woman who died in the context of foreign intervention. Hence, criticisms occurred to be rather soft. For instance, remarks were made like the performance was “too perfect a protagonist for a solo play”. On the other hand, opposition from Jewish communities enticed theatrical critics to be even softer trying to

position the play as a solely piece of art rather than opinion-making performance. Trying to solve this dilemma situation, critics had to admit that the play was “constructed from one woman’s point of view, and as such carries pro-Palestinian weighting, and, by association, anti-Israeli sentiment – the theatre hosting the production was by implication seen as party to the same bias”.

As a result, without proper explanations, New York and other US theatres forbid the play for staging as soon as it was performed in the UK. By the same token, an apt remark by Stephen Fry, Gilliam Slovo, and Harold Pinter in an open letter to *The New York Times* has explicated the whole significance of the work:

We are Jewish writers who supported the Royal Court production of My Name Is Rachel Corrie. We are dismayed by the decision of the New York Theatre Workshop to cancel or postpone the play’s production... In London, it played to sell-out houses. Critics praised it. Audiences found it intensely moving. So, what is it about Corrie’s writings, her thoughts, her feelings, her confusions, her idealism, her courage, her search for meaning in life – what is it that New York audiences must be protected from?.

In any case, the raised debates have only evidenced that this play was more than significant in a general social context.

### **Themes and Controversies**

Differing viewpoints of the critics and general audience of the play stem from a variety of important themes and controversies that revealed the essence of stereotyped misconceptions of the East by the West.

**Safety of young people.** While volunteering is a common practice among Americans and other developed states, especially youths, helping vulnerable communities can be a great danger. Given the text, this issue is self-explanatory in the play. For instance, Rachel’s

panicking email to her mother with a request to reach US officials if anything happens to her is among the examples. Other illustrations are “the shots shifted” 2-4 metres in front of the group of civilians trying to take a dead body from the forefront of the conflict or a dream that made the protagonist conclude “This is it, I’m going to die”. However, these are not Palestinians who pose danger to ordinary civilians in contrast to the general opinion.

**Naivety to “implement a change.”** The whole heroine’s narrative reveals her naive and idealistic willingness to bring peace to the oppressed and she greatly strives to achieve this goal. However, she has to admit: “I can’t cool boiling waters in Russia. I can’t be Picasso. I can’t be Jesus. I can’t save planet single-handedly. I can wash dishes”.

**Vetting procedures.** Regardless of that the entire world believes that Palestinians are monsters attacking Israelis, Rachel observes the opposite and demonstrates her astonished opposition to injustice in her emails. Vetting is one of the painful procedures for refugees who have to stand in lines in check-ups for 12 hours and more while it can be done in a few minutes. Joblessness forces them to work in enemy Israel, though disgusting vetting encourages only 600 individuals to do so as contrasted to 6,000 earlier. People are simply humiliated, while the ‘west and the rest’ believes that they are eternal rebels.

**Raised awareness of young people.** Using social media as a powerful tool, Rachel embeds her pain and empathy to Palestinians in her emails to her mother: “I write and I want to see ... I’m growing out of what you gave me. I’m saving it inside me and growing outwards. Let me fight my monsters”. This approach goes viral and this understanding of actuality instead of stereotyping is able to increase awareness of people about the problems in the region and the world as a whole.

**Futility of war.** Sincerely hoping that she will be “trying to be local” and “respectful of the local” during her trip, Rachel faces “the cross used in a colonialist way” when doors of local Arabs are spray-painted with “blue starts of David”. Moreover, she sees Dr. Samir’s

garden, stays in his house for which the family collected money for 30 years, and 2 tanks and a bulldozer staying nearby and waiting for a signal to bulldoze this all in just a moment...

Although these are just a few horrifying examples of panorama of Israel-to-Palestine relations, refugees have no other place to go and simply wait their fate in hopelessness. All these testimonies vividly illustrate futility of war regardless where it happens.

### **Rachel Corrie vs. Change in Society through Social Media**

Through emails and diary posts that are well-organised rhetorically, Rachel, and theatre with her eyes, eloquently appeals to the audience: “I look forward to seeing more and more people willing to resist the direction the world is moving in”. She is the one who cares of people on both sides of the war that is misinterpreted by the world because that is her “job”. Probably, if she could have used blogging, the public outrage would have been enormous and unstoppable. Nonetheless, her sincere and trustworthy testimonies are able to transform the minds. For instance, her mother is forced to agree: “Palestinians have really being invisible to me, but you are changing that”. In Rafah, among 140,000 people, 60% are refugees for a few times already, 602 houses simply bulldozed, while even more are partially destroyed. Rachel’s real-time documenting of events astonishes the world with facts that are not only eye-opening but thought-provoking and enticing to make a change, at least in perception of reality. Moreover, these are social media that can make these enlightening wonders. While she asks her farther to “sabotage his neo-liberal job”, the greatest message of the play is not individual but global. She says, “If we all help and work together, it will grow and burn free with the potential of tomorrow” and this phrase is indeed change-evoking.

### ***My Name Is...***

The ellipsis in the title of the play is a very eloquent and thought-provoking means used by the playwright. In this way, the author emphasises its twofold nature. On the one hand, due to that the actual name is not indicated in the title, the plot specifies an intersection

of the lifeline of a few individuals: a mother, Suzy, a daughter, Gaby or Ghazala, and a father, Farhan. Their narratives are intertwined since they “became the part of each other’s version of events”. The verbatim play overemphasises the clash of cultures in this family and their consequences. As Bhuchar puts it, *My Name Is...* is “a story of multiculturalism as ‘lived’ experience which asks more questions than gives answers”. On the other hand, ‘namelessness’ of the title implicitly accents on that such a situation could have been common for any other family on the verge of different worldviews and cultures regardless whether it will be globally blown by the media or not. Hence, it is an insight in understanding rather than judging cultural differences.

### **The Response of the Audience**

The two most important points listed by the critics with regard to *My Name Is ...* are complexity of human relationships and prejudices as means of their destruction. For instance, Bell-Bhuyan states that, “This is a play that on the one hand taps into people’s prejudices, and on the other taps into the universally human story of two people who fell in love and then drifted apart.” Gentleman adds to this perspective ascertaining that the performance “reflects on how the domestic calamity was seized on and made to symbolise something bigger than a simple marital collapse, blown up by the media into a catastrophic clash of cultures.” Hence, the notes of advocacy for social change are traceable in the play.

### **The Play vs. Cultural Interaction**

While the story occurred out of an international scandal on the grounds of religious misconceptions, its lessons allow to detect a few important social issues that can be helpful in reconsidering endless misunderstandings between the West and Muslims.

**Marrying outside the cultural background.** The theme of marriage of a Muslim from Glasgow with a Scottish woman can barely be new. However, the omitted problems that can stem from cultural differences, such as cultural blindness, mixed or lost identity, are a

crucial aspect of this relationship that can be a good way for reasonable education of the public and making reasonable choices in life.

**Living as a Muslim.** This issue is based on existing West-to-East prejudices that fill human mindsets with misinterpretations. While initially Suzy was a blind Muslim follower under her husband's patriarchy, "she somehow figure out in her head that papa did really bad with her. Like papa turned her into Muslim". At the same time, Ghazala notes that, "From what I've learned, mama was really strict in Islam . . . She would always make sure we were getting dressed properly. Like our scarf, not even one hair showing. Full sleeves, full shalwar...". This misunderstood pressure heavily impacts the woman in the same way as any other person whose choice of faith will be unconscious.

**Lost identity.** While the above external cultural pressures are a challenge to any person, the media, as an invisible character in the play, heavily contributes to the process of identity loss. For instance, while the "world listens in as Gaby rings that Gaby doesn't won't return", British media accuse Farhan is "of institutional racism". Whereas Suzy discovers that she does not "want to be a Muslim anymore", Ghazala is absolutely frustrated: "Am I a Muslim? Is there a God? Mama I'm so scared cos you're not a Muslim". Even without any objective proofs, media label and confuse their identities. Like in divorce cases, children suffer the worst in these situations. For instance, Gaby's conversation with her mother can be referred to as an example: "Sweetheart, could you please, tell me if you are alone?" "No, there're 25 press sittin' in front of us... And she just started crying ... and it was so heartbreaking". Media seek for sensations and this 'not leaving this family alone' is indeed heartbreaking and makes them lost each other.

**Brainwashing** is a multidimensional issue, though a clear threat to all characters. To illustrate, the fight between ex spouses is perceived as fight against brainwashing by Farhan: "because Suzy became anti-Islamic, she tried to brainwash Ghazala. ... Three children she has

lost to Islam. They would stand up and say, 'This is wrong, this is wrong'. This is regardless of the fact he was initially brainwashing his wife making her cover her hair all the time and be a Muslim. Thus, this phenomenon in the play verges with the issue of indoctrination.

**Naivety.** The theme of naivety is also present in the play, and here technology becomes a human-friendly tool. To illustrate, even though Gaby appears in the epicentre of practically international conflict, she is still a child who loves her parents notwithstanding the challenges she encounters. Her sincere response to mother is more than touching: "Hi, mama. Got ur email. Fnkx 4 understandin me n carin abwt ma feelings n wot i want. N how i wnt2 live ma lyf... Thnk u SOOOOOO much! U made me soooo happy now. luv u. ma".

### **The Play vs. Social Change**

Bhuchar has aptly named its play a "love affair that became a war", but this war was not unambiguous and was not limited to a single family. All issues considered in *My Name Is...* revealed "racial thinking when visible appearance, specifically complexion and physical features, is given primacy in the determining of a person's identity and, concomitantly, in the imagining of their likely behaviour". This misguided fixation on Islam-based prejudices enticed media, and people who consumed their information, intervene the lives of lost and confused identities of the protagonists. At the same time, the documented dialogues of these families are able to touch hearts deeply and entice to rethink such a blind position and thoughtless media followship.

The analysed play vividly embodies an assumption that "theatre reproduces the same hierarchies that plague the world at large, the same assumptions of who can speak, who must listen, and who is not even invited in conversation". While this play did not show that a social change occurred, it shows the differing sides as a way to derive objective idea of the situation. In any case, theatre entices people to filter the information and be thinking human beings

rather than blind followers of stereotyped worldviews and this is definitely a step forward towards a social change.

### **Conclusion**

Trying to clarify to what extent theatre can be a tactic for advocacy of social change, the content of the analysed plays allowed to emphasise critical points to be taken into account. First, the theoretical background inevitably confirms that theatre has inner potential in terms of advocating and making social changes. Second, the two plays under analysis clearly demonstrated that this potential can be thoroughly embedded in each hero's remark practically. Third, social and conventional media, as elements of the plot, can be powerful sources, though their role cannot be perceived as unambiguous. Foremost, media frame the reality in accordance with dominant worldviews: e.g. Palestinians are stereotypically depicted as enemies, while Muslims are either terrorists or barbarians. On the other hand, digital media can reframe this reality in an eye-blink pace. Thus, theatre is capable to advocate for social changes, but the extent of this influence can be limited by prejudiced critics, frightened politicians, and individuals who are uncertain due to media misconceptions.