

# Sarmad Sehbai:

**'Spices of madness. The foremost component of change in Pakistan's literature and the performing arts over the fifty years... the werewolf of Pakistan's literati.'**

(F, Yazdi, *The Nation*, '97)

Sarmad Sehbai is one of Pakistan's most mercurial artists- a poet, playwright and director of theatre and video plays- a man who has struggled towards existential revolution but always shunned intellectual labelism, remaining firmly on the other side of the mainstream.

As a young student at the colonial institution of Government College Lahore, he became renowned for his poetry, injecting fresh imagery and modern idioms to Urdu poetry. Leaving College, he joined government run PTV where he wrote his first tele-play, *The Lampost* (1968) for which he was char sheeted by the government. He continued to write plays but for the stage, producing the first original Punjabi play at Government College, *Tu Kaun?* (1971). This was followed by several other successes, notably *The Dark Room* (1971) and *Phandey* (1972)- Sarmad became known as the 'enfant terrible' of Pakistan, writing for the first time in Pakistan's history powerful, authentic plays, firmly rooted in social realities and local vernacular.

During General Zia's military dictatorship in the 1980s, cultural and theatrical activities were officially banned; Sarmad was prohibited from theatrical and cultural forums, including the television where he had continued to hold position. A handful of likeminded intellectuals founded began to perform plays in clandestine locations, antagonistic to the prevailing state; one of the first plays produced was Sarmad's *Panjhwar Chiragh* (*The Fifth Candle*, 1984). Sarmad was banished from Lahore, and sent to Islamabad- the bureaucratic capital, a synthetic city of absence. Here Sarmad turned to the region's mystical roots and back to his poetry, releasing Urdu from the Persian-Arabic mode through imagery rooted in Seraiki and Sindhi. Later re-admitted to PTV, he produced a scope of video works, which he both wrote and directed; dramas, *Bachon Ka Park* (*Children's Park*, 1989), *Naya Qanoon* (*The Brand New Law*, 1997), the seminal *Fankar Gali* (1991); music video *Classic One* (1989); and documentary *Moghuls of the Road* (1999) - all created with slim resources and long-battles with the National censor board. These films provided a radical departure from the monolithicism of Pakistani Television, particularly visually.

Sarmad is frequently reprimanded to why he has not produced more, his response is simple 'the mainstream art mafia does not allow me to do my work. Ours is not a 'visual' society; its text orientated. The word is divine and sacred. There is too much body control for visuals as an art form to flourish here.' In a society which prevents intellectual defiance and is increasingly dominated by consumer-culture, Sarmad attempts to divorce himself from the art-mart, he is currently writing poetry and a novel in the English language.



## Screenwriting & Direction

**'Moghuls of the Road'** Documentary on truck art and highway culture in Pakistan, 45-min, 1999.

**'Naya Qanoon'** [*The Brand New Law*], Teleplay, 50-min, 1997.  
Received the PTV Award for the Best Writer and Director, 1997.

**'Indus Europa'**, Video, a dance drama in collaboration with French Choreographers, 1996.

**'Fankar Gali'**, Video-film, 90- min, 1990.

**'Bachon Ka Park'** [*Children's Park*], Teleplay, 1989.  
Received PTV Gold Medal for Best Play, 1990.

**'Classic One'**, Music Video, a visual interpretation of classical music for PTV, 1989

## Stage Productions- plays written & directed

**'Word Fall'** a collage of modern Norwegian and Pakistani Poetry interpreted through dance and music. Olso, 2002.

**'Sher La Sher'** [*Poetry sans Poetry*], Urdu, Pakistan Arts Council, Lahore, 1985.

**'Dark Room'**, Urdu, 1971-81, staged six times at various places including, Pakistan Arts Council, Lahore.

**'Ashraf-ul-Makhlooqaat'** [*In His Own Image*], Urdu, Pakistan Arts Council, Lahore, 1976.

**'Hash'**, Urdu, Pakistan Arts Council, Lahore, 1975.

**'Too Kaun'** [*Know Thyself*], Punjabi, 1971, GCDC, won Government College Convocation Award, 1971.

**'Ek Mauziz Shehri Ki Rasm-e Janaza'** [*Funeral of a Respectable Citizen*], Urdu, National College of Arts, Lahore, 1972.

**'Phandey'** [*The Noose*], Urdu, Najamuddin Drama Festival, won Best Stage Play Award, Kinnaird College, Lahore, 1972

Sarmad Sehbai will be participating in Sunay'ha Theatre Festival at Oh ! Art, Bethnal Green in Spring 2005.

Compiled by Claire Pamment

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