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How dancer Sheema Kermani defied Pakistan's conservatives to infuse her art with activism

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Through her women's organisation Tehrik-e-Niswan, she has spent decades holding performances about social issues.

In *Pasoori*, the runaway hit music video by Coke Studio, the first shot viewers see is of a grey-haired woman in a striking yellow sari standing in a high prayer pose. As the music builds, her graceful spin is captured in a tracking shot. In her hair is a glimpse of a red jasmine flower. Her hands rotate slowly, arms rising above and then forming a warm embrace.

The woman is Sheema Kermani, 71, one of Pakistan's leading dancers and choreographers. Over the decades, Kermani has defied rising Islamic conservatism in her country to perform publicly, earning criticism, threats and accolades. She is noted for her efforts to intertwine her art with activism through the activities of the organisation she founded called Tehrik-e-Niswan, or The Women's Movement.

The performing arts, Kermani has said, is "...one of the most important ways to empower people who have less power...who are marginalised".

Over video-conference and email from Karachi, Kermani spoke about her decades-long journey, influences and passion.

Kermani, born in Rawalpindi in 1951, initially trained in Karachi under Ghanshyam in Bharatanatyam, Kathak, Kathakali and Manipuri. Her early exposure to dance and performance helped her recognise the power of performative storytelling. "Every time you understand something more about dance and about the performance of dance, you connect with your audience," she said.

In 1988, she received a scholarship from the Indian Council of Cultural Relation that allowed her to hone her Kathak and Bharatanatyam styles at New Delhi's Bharatiya Kala Kendra and train in Odissi under Aloka Panicker and Mayadhar Raut.

Politics and power

It was in England, where Kermani studied in the early 1970s, that she witnessed the power of protest and dissent. Kermani said she was drawn to American poet Allen Ginsberg and the Flower Power anti-war movement he inspired, feminists Kate Millett and Germaine Greer, the Black Panther movement for racial justice and Leftist activist Tariq Ali, among others.

She returned to Karachi with a deeper understanding of the poverty and injustice in her home country, especially of how women suffered. But she also knew the limitations of these movements

and noted how after the revolutions in the former Soviet Union and China, women were expected to return to the kitchen

“I connected with a lot of Leftist groups and I found over a period of time that even within them there’s so much patriarchy,” she said.

Kermani wanted to engage closely with working-class women but found that they were largely absent from trade unions. They had limited leadership opportunities and little awareness about improving their standards of living.

Much like American suffragist Helen Todd, Kermani hoped to reignite the conversation about the dignity of women beyond basic necessities. “All those things made me move to think about a platform where women would be able to express themselves, come out with their total creative potential,” she said.

That is what prompted Kermani to establish Tehrik-e-Niswan in 1979.

Dance, dictatorship and activism

Kermani said that by the time she had evolved into a “conscious performer”, public performance had already been banned in Pakistan. The early years of Tehrik-e-Niswan coincided with General Zia-ul-Haq’s accession to power after he staged a military coup against the government led by Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and declared martial law in 1977.

Haq also enacted a series of punitive Shariah laws. In 1979, he introduced the [Hudood Ordinances](#) that effectively made women as second-class citizens in the eyes of the law. These laws criminalised non-marital sex and adultery, often placing the [burden of proof on the woman](#). It led to women, including sexual assault victims or those wrongly accused by their husbands, being charged and imprisoned.

Kermani said the Zia years were a time of strict moral censorship of all media. Dance and music events were shut down. “Women and girls were forced to adopt the chaddar as a covering and many such, similar happenings,” she said.

Those who performed had to face serious criminal and penal consequences. “Given this atmosphere, most of the work and most of the issues we picked on were related to the oppression of women and the hypocrisy of using religion for political benefit,” she said.

Kermani said these laws created an atmosphere of anxiety in the artistic community. Questions were raised: “Do you seriously want to do this? Do you seriously want to take on that risk of being questioned...maybe even being prisoned? One had to be very certain as to why one is doing this. What is the point of doing this?”

In the midst of this repressive atmosphere, Kermani in 1984 gave her first public dance performance at a friend’s home. There were nearly 100 people in the audience. Pakistanis were starved of opportunities to watch classical dance recitals, she said. Emboldened by the response, Kermani decided to engage more with audiences across the country through the activities of Tehrik-e-Niswan.

Initially, the group held seminars and discussions on social concerns such as caste and religious killings, marital rape, unsafe abortions and religious dogma. Members travelled through the provinces and small towns holding performances, after which they would have discussions with the audiences.

Kermani soon went from public performances to training students in classical dance.

Social performances

Among Tehrik-e-Niswan's focuses has been the gender-based killings known as "honour" killings, or called karo-kari in Pakistan. The phenomenon refers to families murdering young girls and women, if found or alleged to have committed adultery or had pre-marital sexual relations, under the garb of protecting family's honour.

The group organised plays about the murders across the Sindh region and southern Punjab to audiences of more than 17,000 and produced a documentary *Aakhir Kyun* about them. To bring more attention to these crimes, Kermani has also collaborated with global artists and joined Pakistan's annual Aurat March or Women's March.

Kermani's solo work also revolves around gender concerns. Her most memorable performance, a one-woman play *Who Am I*, highlights the challenges faced by a woman at home, in the workplace and the multiple roles she is expected to play.

In an interview in 1994, after she appeared on television playing a trafficked woman from Bihar who was forced into sex work, Kermani was asked why she took on controversial characters. "I want to do roles which say something," she answered.

Nearly 20 years later, she knows that was the right answer. "The more I delved into why I'm doing it, the more I felt that I have to do it," she said. "There was a force inside me that said this is what you have to do. This pushed me to adjust to whatever possibilities were available to me."

Tehrik-e-Niswan - and Kermani - draw their inspiration from literature and mythology, such as the *Antigone*, written by Greek tragedian Sophocles, and the comedy *Lysistrata* written by Aristophanes. The organisation has also produced adaptations of stories with well-written feminist characters such as *The House of Bernard Alba* by Spanish playwright Federico García Lorca, and *Anji* by Indian playwright Vijay Tendulkar.

Over the years, the appeal of Tehrik-e-Niswan's work has crossed borders leading to collaborations with civil society organisations, international non-profits and other cultural groups.

The group has also worked to create an Indo-Pak cross-border artistic dialogue through its collaborations and productions. Its performance of Indian playwright Asghar Wajahat's *Jis Lahore Nai Vekhya, O Jamya Hi Nai* - The Person Who Hasn't Seen Lahore, Hasn't Been Born Yet - reflects the lives and traumatic experiences of families affected by Partition. Despite being banned in 1991, the play has been performed countless times in Pakistan. It also went on an Indian tour of 12 cities.

Defining change, innovating

Improvisation, Kermani believes, is one of the main strategies by which she has ensured that the group continues to mirror the realities of Pakistan's society despite the conservative milieu.

For instance, Tehrik-e-Niswan has re-enacted incidents related to the minority Ahmaddiya community, often amid fears of angry responses from the audience, viewers walking out and even police complaints. The persecuted Ahmaddiyas have faced attacks and are prohibited from calling themselves Muslim.

Kermani smiled while acknowledging the fear that accompanies Tehrik-e-Niswan's performances that relate to sensitive topics. "Despite the scare, one has to learn," she said.

There have been instances where the group wrapped up performances mid-way, for fear of arrest. In 2005, the group was invited to perform at the Women's Initiative for Peace in South Asia, in Lucknow but was forced to return to Pakistan for depicting "[anti-US sentiments](#)".

In 2017, a day after a terrorist attack killed nearly 90 people at the Lal Shahbaz Qalandar Sufi shrine in Sindh, Kermani participated in the dhamaal, a Sufi dance ritual.

Over the years, performances have been shortened due to the audience's limited attention span. "We have talked about marital rape, and people have sat through it," she said. "But we have done [it] for 15 minutes. If we did it for longer, it would create discomfort...15 minutes also is too short a time for opponents and enough to make an impact, leave a mark."

To Mark 5th anniversary of Sehwan blast, Tehrik-e-Niswan performed Dhamal at Lal shahbaz Qalandar's shrine. [#tehrikeniswan](#) [#lalshahbazqalandar](#) [#sehwanblast](#)
pic.twitter.com/d5BB48Ee7d

— Sheema Kermani (@tehrikeniswan) [February 16, 2022](#)

Kermani's art and activism has won her accolades. In 2005, she was among the 1000 PeaceWomen collectively nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize as a symbolic gesture.

But, she believes the impact of Tehrik-e-Niswan on the lives of individuals is one of her greatest accomplishments. She recalled a conversation with Zulfikar, a musician from the group, who over the years became aware of the misogyny and sexism in his family.

"When I got married, I used to behave angrily with my wife," Zulfikar had told her. "Once or twice I even raised my hand on her. However, after working with Tehrik-e-Niswan over the years, I understood that my wife is my equal."

Kermani said she has seen how women often fight with their families to work with Tehrik-e-Niswan and find a sense of belonging within it. For her, the real work of Tehrik-e-Niswan is to carry the dialogue forward. "What I try to do is create a movement, not just a group or company," she said.

As the *Pasoori* video notches up more than 200 million views on YouTube, its message is clear - art does not just transcend boundaries, it also brings people together. Kermani hopes to keep this message alive through her dance.

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