

Questions on Stage: Materializing Performance

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Performance is not just 'doing' or 're-doing', but it is an effort to embody the tension between culture and history on the one hand and the ever changing present on the other. Therefore, 'performance' implies a self consciousness about 'doing' and 're-doing' on the part of both the performers and the spectators. This conception of self consciousness in the production of cultural meanings through performative acts is pivotal in community based theatre and performance activities. MacAloon's remark on cultural performances that they function as a "crucible for self examination" holds in the case of socially engaged performances such as community and participatory theatres. Both the performers and the spectators alike reiterate the fact that the cultural and social meta-commentary is a primary function of performance art when it pivots around the manifold tensions which draw itself inside a community. The conscious self reflection and examination through the dramatisation of collective myths and histories in an effort to explore possible alternatives are crucial for community based performative ventures. In these contexts, Smith's works ostensibly engage in precipitating a meta-commentary on communities.

This aspect of social meta-commentary resulting from the performer's engagement with communities looms large specifically when the performance practices which dramatise concerns, desires and especially the visibility of those normally excluded race, class and gender categories are examined. In Anna Deavere Smith's performances, the rigour of social meta-commentary evolves from her representations of a variety of characters from various gender, racial and ethnic backgrounds by transforming the project of interrogating the essence of identity into a political activity. Marvin Carlson suggests that this radical performance practice is most visible when women, gays and ethnic and racial minorities engage in performance practice to address their own social and community concerns(1996,144). There is a wide spread interest in the questioning, exposing and perhaps even the dismantling of those cultural and social constructions through cross racial, cross gender performances by staging the performer's body in a protean manner. Such performance practices are often identified as 'postmodern'. Jill Dollan observed: "(T)he postmodern performance style breaks with realist narrative strategies, heralds the death of unified characters, decentres the subject, and foregrounds conventions of perception" (1996, 97). The performance practices of Anna Deavere Smith unobtrusively inspire the spectator to relocate radically their position as spectator subject in culture through her emphatic unsettling of conventions of representation. In this sense, performance text of contemporary practitioners of performance art is not simply a site of representation, but it is a vantage ground to interrogate the very ideology of representation.

Jill Dollan recalls a performance of Anna Deavere Smith in the 1988 Women and Theater Program (WTP) in San Diego as an instance, both of Smith's radicalisation of performance art and the predominantly white audience's incapacity to withstand the deconstruction of spectatorial positions. As the only Black woman among 100 participants, Smith performed the oral history of WTP through her perceptions as a Black woman. Some spectators who expected true mimesis as well as their 'authentic' representation, got confused with Smith's performance of oral history and their position as spectator cum character. "By searching for an 'authentic'

representation of their own experience, and focusing on their dissatisfaction with its absence, the spectators erased the residue of Smith's commentary"(Dolan, Jill 1996, 103-104). The spectators seeking 'authentic representation' of experience fail to capture the meaning of mimesis in Smith's work. Smith's mimetic performance art resists, challenges and even subverts the codes and conventions of representation facilitated by dominant social and cultural systems. This performance practice contests and consequently rejects the possibilities of 'authentic' representation.

Impersonation and mimicry are seminal to Smith's strategy of performative mimesis which acutely challenges the structures of conventional 'mimesis'. Her mimetic art, very much like her protean performance style which embodies subjects in a shifting, transgressing and fluid manner, has a seminal role in defining a radical performance practice. Smith's characters, whether Rev. AL Sharpton, Pogrebin or Carmel Cato in *Fires in the Mirror*, Cornel West, Eline Young or Twilight in *Twilight: Los Angeles 1992*; Clinton, Graydon Carter or Anita Hill in *House Arrest* gather energy in performance through her practice of potential mimesis.

'Mimesis' always points to the absented presence of a 'true real'. Psychoanalyst and Feminist, Luce Irigaray interrogated the authenticity of the 'true real' which perpetuated the patriarchal notion of truth through epistemological, ontological and metaphorical discourses. Irigaray's reading of Plato's cave as a theatre examines 'mimesis' as an attempt to maintain a fixed and monolithic truth. She observed in Plato's condemnation of 'mimesis', an attempt to control the proliferation of alternatives in an effort to bring in a stable and monolithic patriarchal truth. Irigaray favours 'mimicry' because the multiple and excessive representations in mimicry will undo the monolithic and fixed patriarchal truth. Simultaneously such mimetic practices as opposed to Plato's concept of 'mimesis' destabilise the "idea of essence, truth and origin" by displacing continually these norms "onto a question of material relations and operations" as Elin Diamond suggests. (1989, 65) In order to resist the imposition of patriarchal truth through mimesis, Irigaray proposes 'mimicry', a multiple and excessive mimetic practice, which undermines the unique claim of patriarchal truth. She invents that mimicry as a mimetic act has a radical potential, especially in the context of Feminist Performance Art by defining it as a process of resubmitting woman's identity to stereotypical views in order to call the views themselves into question. The repetitive performances involved in mimicry are not enacted faithfully. Elin Diamond henceforth suggests that woman must play with mimesis to engage in the dismantling of structures of perception.

In her analysis of Western theatre in the light of the theories of Plato, Aristotle, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, Elin Diamond describes mimetic theatre and performance of women as a practice that dismantles the patriarchal notion of mimesis. Diamond's notion of mimicry is a doctrine version of Plato's doctrine of mimesis and is posited antithetical to the latter.

Anna Deavere Smith excels in bringing out the dismantling potential of mimicry through her mimetic performances by interrogating 'authentic representation' as a realm of patriarchal truth and hegemony. Mimesis in Smith's hands is a performative strategy very much like 'mimicry' which relies on performing multiplicity of actualities simultaneously by putting into question the single, monolithic and authentic 'real'. This practice of challenging and subverting the notion 'true real' by means of performing real life characters ultimately results in unsettling the representations of dominant culture.

Michel de Certeau described the strategy of a performer to resist, challenge and even subvert dominant representational practices as 'tactics'. The activities under the rubric of 'tactics' precisely belong to the 'other' and outside the institutionalised cultural practices.

'Tactics' always remain in a flux, in a fragmentary mode and always seek expression. This strategy of 'tactics' subverts structures of subjection and domination in an effort to exploit opportunities to distort 'proper' activities. Smith's performances can be cited as an instance of 'tactics' that avenge images produced and legitimised by hegemonic cultural practices.

Smith's protean performatives in documentary format unsettle the representational canons and conventions by problematising the very process of 'mimesis' in mainstream theatre as well as by challenging the essential, fixed and pregiven status of identities in representation. This is a process of deconstructing the practices of representation as a site of production of cultural meanings, which assigns conservative roles to racial, gender and ethnic identities. These experimental theatrical practices undo the hierarchy of mainstream theatre which is historically constituted on the technique of empathetic identification.

Anna Deavere Smith's performances are a post structuralist and post dramatic theatrical practice which foregrounds "a self-contradictory identity ... made up of heterogeneous and heteronymous representations of gender, race and class" as Teresa de Lauretis has pointed out (1986, 9). The major focus of Smith's performative challenge is a critique of dominant representational practices in culture such as realism in mainstream American Theatre. The concepts of 'mimicry' and 'tactics' throw light up on the radical potential of her work in bringing the voices of the invisible categories to the stage.

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