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The Questions of Ethics and Power: Nuances of Politicizing Performance

C.S.Biju Ph.D, Associate Professor in English, St.Thomas' College(Autonomous), Thrissur, Kerala, India.

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Abstract

In Anna Deavere Smith's performance project on presidency and power, various characters were interviewed and presented on stage from politics, media and academia. Through Staton and Montecello tour guide Penny Kaiser, Thomas Jefferson's presidential life and his attitude towards slavery are disputed and investigated to re-examine his complex relationship to his slaves. Penny Kiser says, "you know, he (Jefferson) died a hundred and seven thousand dollars in debt. Many of his slaves were mortaged. So he didn't have the right to sell them, but oh, I mean to free them" (Smith.2000, 9). Jefferson believed that freeing people who were brought up in the habits of slavery was like abandoning children.

Introduction:

In Anna Deavere Smith's performance project on presidency and power, various characters were interviewed and presented on stage from politics, media and academia. Through Staton and Montecello tour guide Penny Kaiser, Thomas Jefferson's presidential life and his attitude towards slavery are disputed and investigated to re-examine his complex relationship to his slaves. Penny Kiser says, "you know, he (Jefferson) died a hundred and seven thousand dollars in debt. Many of his slaves were mortaged. So he didn't have the right to sell them, but oh, I mean to free them" (Smith.2000, 9). Jefferson believed that freeing people who were brought up in the habits of slavery was like abandoning children. Accidentally during the preparation of *House Arrest*, Smith found out Thomas Jefferson's document, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, a seminal document that reveals the character Jefferson as well as his attitude towards slavery. A friend of her research assistant, Nora, brought in the necessity of concentrating on the *Notes* for a work like *House Arrest*. "I picked up the *Notes* in a book store before I left. One night after the performance, I took them out. My heart sank. Thomas Jefferson was a racist, a real racist and there was no way around that feet" (Smith 2000a, 131). Jefferson examined Blacks as scientific specimens to elaborate his theory of the superiority of the Whites over the Blacks. Smith's attempt by bringing *Notes* into the focus is to explore the character of Jefferson on the basis of its innate contradiction. "On the one hand he wrote the Declaration and on the other hand he had slaves" (Smith 2000, 134). Smith found out that this dilemma was not only a political one but a scientific one too because the *Notes* were written in the guise of a scientist experimenting with race differences.

The use of scientific devices and terminology was a regular practice to regulate white control over the slaves throughout the history of slavery in America. The use of an arsenal of repressive techniques such as castration, flogging, amputation and summary execution was the usual penalties for rebellious behaviour and resistance. These methods of physical torture later found their justification by 'scientifically' finding out certain psychiatric abnormalities among the slaves. Resistance was considered a mental disease, "an ailment of the brain that they named 'drapetomania,' the main symptom of which was an incurable urge to run away. Similarly, an ailment termed 'dysesthesia Aethiopica' only affected slaves" which makes them lazy (Mama 1995, 20). Amina Mama shows us how science and the maintenance of domination are related during times of slavery (17-41). It was a usual practice to examine racial difference in a scientist's perspective. It was not simply a matter of academic interests of the institutionalised science: "On the other side of the Atlantic, Goinean produced his treatise on racial difference, and influential medical journals everywhere began to present

Correspondence
C.S.Biju Ph.D, Associate Professor in English.
St.Thomas' College(Autonomous), Thrissur, Kerala, India.

categories of evidence that differences in skin pigmentation were accompanied by differences in brain size, musculature, nerves, membranes, sexual organs. Numerous dissections were performed on the bodies of Africans in order to draw comparisons between black people and apes, between criminals and 'lower races' and the mentally subnormal" (22-23). These are instances of how scientific evidences were fabricated to subordinate slaves in American history of slavery.

If we leaf through Jefferson's *Notes*, it is easily comprehensible that it comprised the 'scientific' assumptions formulated to legitimise the oppression of the Africans. For Jefferson, skin colour, hair, body odour and intelligence of the blacks signal their inferiority:

> Their inferiority is not the effect merely of their condition of life. I advance it therefore as a suspicion only, that the blacks whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to the whites in the endowments of body and mind (Smith 2000a, 16).

Smith performed Thomas Jefferson in the fragment titled 'Scientific Evidence 1781-1998' with a black board to demonstrate the 'evidences' with two crew members to assist her. It was performed after the 'constructed dialogue' between Roger Kennedy and Annette Gordon Read and Smith's interview with Staton. The character of Jefferson is presented intertwined with his controversial relationship to Sally Hemings, one of his slaves. Scientific enquiry including DNA testing has been conducted to prove that Jefferson had illegitimate children in Sally Hemings.

For Smith, experience with Jefferson's *Notes* was an "unexpected shock". Not only were they a shock to my intellect, they were a shock to my entire physical system" (Smith2000a,136). This paved the way for Smith's understanding of the white feelings of superiority prevalent in society, media and encrusted in presidency as well.

According to film maker Ken Burns, the story of Jefferson's illicit sexual congress with his slave was a story manipulated by James Callender, a journalist out of his enmity to Jefferson. Thomas Jefferson papers unveil the racial paradigm inherent in structures of power. Anna Deavere Smith's analysis of the interrelationship between power and sexuality explores the historical nuances of presidential interventions in the ethical terrain of world politics from the perspective of an artist.

Arrested Community: Images of Incarceration

Smith's myriad experiences in Washington, throughout the interview process justify the vision of Washington as a community with arrested communication. Smith made her first research trip to Washington to investigate specially the myth and reality of the Presidency in the background of severe criticisms posited by press and television over many years. This journey into the heart of the mystery of power in America is incorporated into her journeys in search of the 'American Character'. Her obsession with Washington is not at all an obsession with a location or an event as in her previous works in *On the Road* series. Washington is a location, perpetual event and an array of themes.

There are many people including Gordon Davidson, Director Mark Taper Forum, Los Angeles, who considered *House Arrest* " a community conversation"(Haithman, 1999, 1). *House Arrest* signals the impossibility of such theatrical practice in Washington due to the complexity of the 'community' in Washington. It is a complex system of social relationships that survives with a different set of strategies. For Smith, "Washington is the most marginal community in the country, it is a very closed, specific world made up of people who tell each other the same story, over and over again" (Haithman 1999, 1). The atmosphere in Washington is incredibly 'anti-community' and terror evoking for outsiders.

In this regard, comparing her visits to Crown Heights, Brooklyn and Koreatown L.A, and her experience in Washington Smith remarked: "I was more afraid in Washington than I was in the embered streets of race riots" (Smith. 2000, 27). She finds the "grandest of patriarchal structures" in Washington. It is "full of people whose business is to know everything. What they lack is the ability to identify with anyone, other than those just like themselves" (Smith.2000a, 73). When Lani Guiner, an intellectual from Harward was asked by Smith in a public interview: "When you gaunt and you speak about what happened to you in Washington, who do you think you are talking to? the answer was breath-freezing. "I think I'm talking to the president" (Smith.2000a, 99).

The communityscape of Washington is structured as non-communicative and, at every point, the city evokes images of a great prison house. Smith captured this sense by blending the images of White House as prison house where media has a panoptic position and the Maryland Correctional

Institute for Women.

Smith's interest in the character of journalist James Callander was illuminated by her research for *House Arrest* at Montecello, Thomas Jefferson's home. Once upon a time, there was exchange of letters and ideas between Jefferson and Callender. Callender was put in prison for his writings against John Adams, Jefferson's opponent in the Presidential elections. After the imprisonment, Callender demanded money and the post of a postmaster. Failing to get both, he alleged that Thomas Jefferson had sexual contacts with one of his slaves, Sally Hemings. Callender wrote several articles and stories about this affair with his strong racial bias enraged possibly due to the presence of slaves in the outbreak called 'Gabriel's Rebellion' while he was in prison. Through songs, stories and other writings about Jefferson's sexual involvement with Sally Hemings, Callender elaborated the issue as an entertainer breaking out all of ethical, moral, political and human concerns. One of these songs describes Sally:

> Thick pouting hips! How sweet their grace! …
> In glaring red and chalky white
> Let others beauty see
> Me no such tawdry tints delight
> No Black's the hue for me.
> (Smith 2000a, 13)

This process of transforming the entire story into an entertainment makes Callender a seminal figure evoking similitude to the present. "What amazes me is the time and imagination Callender spent turning this story into entertainment" (Smith 2000a, 102). The character of James Callender was performed by Smith with quotations from his writings in 'The Recorder Newspaper 1803.' The report claims that Jefferson's concubine Sally has a son of ten or twelve years of age, who has close resemblance to the features of the President.

'James Callender' fragment is immediately followed by a constructed conversation, a remarkable theatrical device as far as the possibilities of documentary theatre are concerned. This technique enabled Smith to perform two characters, Roger Kennedy and Annitte Gorden Reed simultaneously on the stage. In actuality, the words spoken by Kennedy and Reed were not spoken in each other's presence. Through unique character crossings, Smith performed Reed and Kennedy with synchronous presence of Smith voice over. The character of Roger Kennedy appears with a cup of coffee and Reed with a mimosa. Smith uses these two things to distinguish the characters of Reed and Kennedy. Both are suspicious of the actuality of the Jefferson Sally Heming's sexual congress. It is "sort like pick your nightmare for histories" (Smith2000, 13). Smith's short interview with Cinder Staton in which Smith asks about documentary evidences from Sally Hemings follows the constructed dialogue. Station clarifies that there is no documentary evidence regarding Sally's details available in Montecello.

In the second section of Act 1 titled 'Cohabitation,' Smith embarks on performing different positions by creating an atmosphere similar to that of her interviews. Smith's presence is vehemently emphasised by using the 'voice over' technique. The 'voice over' enables Smith both to take the authorial position of interviewer and to interpret the narrative for the spectators. The performer exists on the stage as an all encompassing performing subject regulating other subjectivities through character crossings and the element of alienation effect imparted by the questions asked 'voice over' in Smith's own voice. Consequently, the imminent danger of spectatorial identification is minimised to perpetuate the debating nature of the work. This strategy marks an advanced stage in Smith's performative experimentations regarding the subjects performed.

Eugene Foster who authored the report on DNA of Thomas Jefferson and the descendants of Sally Hemings in 1998 appears in HA to contradict the popularised view of Sally Hemings's story. "Scientific results did not prove / that Thomas Jefferson fathered any of Sally Hemings children . . . the general public has come to believe that / the DNA evidence / has proved the relationship..... I emphasised strongly that it would not be possible / for us to prove / any thing with one hundred per centcertainty / either positively or negatively" (Smith2000, 20). Eugene Foster represents another facet of scientific development in which the paradigm of science fails to perpetuate any single truth.

Ken Burns in his second appearance in this session establishes the view that the controversy over Jefferson – Sally Hermings affair is fully derived from the late twentieth century obsession with the private life of celebrities. Being a slave to the president, Sally was completely under the control of Jefferson. Even if she was killed by her master, the law in America at that time would have condoned that. Ken Burns points to the complexities of practices of slavery and concludes with a remark

made by Jefferson. Jefferson said that slavery was like "holding a wolf by the / ears you didn't like it but you didn't dare let go"(Smith2000 20).

White House in President Roosevelt's time is presented in the section 'An Easier Time' by Smith, performing a number of characters to signify the difference in power relations and its appearance to the public and to the media. Here, R.W. Apple, a journalist of the *NewYork Times*, speaks to Smith in a restaurant with noises and laughter in the background. Apple discusses the sea change in the relationship between President and the media in the Roosevelt era and the present by hinting at the story of a young journalist of *NewYork Times* named Bob Post. There were 'unaskable' questions to the President in Roosevelts time. When Bob asked such a question –- a question about running a third term in a press conference -- he was asked to stand in the corner by President Roosevelt. President has become more transparent and questionable in modern times. Reporters competed to please the president with songs, skits and mimicry in the parties hoisted in the White House.

Smith brings in the character of Lizzie Mcduffie, White House cook for F. D. Roosevelt, in the form of an interview. The actual source of this episode is an interview conducted by historian Bernard Asbell. Smith appears as Lizzie Mcduffie on the stage and Asbell's questions are asked voice over and some questions in his own taped voice. Asbell focuses on Mcduffies experience with Franklin D. Roosevelt, and she discloses the president's friendly, informal nature by revealing his eating habits and intimate conversation at the breakfast table.

Lizzie Mcduffie during the interview often sought the help of papers from her apron pockets to make her memories authentic. The last morning of Roosevelt is described in the episode titled 'Hot Water Bottle / peeved.' Mcduffie episode and Walter Trohan's remarks on Roosevelt are immediately followed by Michael Frisby, a Wall Street journalist's critique of George Bush for his mingling with journalists. Frisby prefers Clinton because Clinton kept the media people at a distance.

The debate over the White House in the Roosevelt era is concluded with the observations of Gary Hart, candidate for Presidential elections in 1988 and Peggy Noonan, presidential speech writer for Reagan and Bush. Hart stepped out of the race due to a sexual scandal unearthed by the press. Hart finds it as a matter of 'control.' "I think what political journalism in the late twentieth century wants is control" (Smith2000 33). Hart concluded that the media intrude, gossip and ensationalise someone's personal life just because it is the method of gaining control over politics.

The third session of the first act titled 'The Grand Deaths of the Race' deals with Lincoln's White House which incorporates an array of historic personalities including Lincoln and Walt Whitman are brought to the stage. The character of Elizabeth Keckley, a former slave and dressmaker to Mrs. Lincoln, serves as an introductory session to this part. Keckley reveals her entry into the White House with sharp remarks on her slave life and freedom: "My name is Elizabeth Keckley .....I was born a slave – was the child of slave parents. The twelve hundred dollars with which I purchased the freedom of myself… I went to work in the earnest, and in a short time paid every cent" (Smith 2000, 35). One of her patrons one day asked her to make a dress of Mrs. Lincoln and thereafter, she became a regular dressmaker of Mrs. Lincoln. Her autobiography, which is titled as *Behind the Scenes, or Thirty Years as a Slave and Four Years in the White House*, reveals the life of Mrs. Lincoln after the death of Abraham Lincoln. She had become very poor and Keckley accompanied her to New York to sell some of her dresses.

While performing Keckley, two slides were exhibited in the background. One was that of White House in Lincoln's time and other was a photograph of Keckley. In the next episode Abraham Lincoln gives out his dream about his own death in which he found out in the East Room of White House a catafalque with the corpse wrapped in funeral vestments. It was Lincoln's own body .

The character of Brian Palmer, former photographer of U.S. News and World Report, makes his first appearance in this episode titled 'Body Watch.' The major event in this section is the assassination of President Lincoln. Smith merges in images and motifs related to Lincoln's death in the performance. 'Body Watch' signifies primarily the predicament of the photographer or news reporter, who is bound to follow the president. In this second appearance in the same scene, Palmer describes the whole event of the notorious relationship between press and presidency as 'political theatre.' According the Palmer, the picture of the President created and transmitted through the press is the result of the undemocratic relationship between press and the power centre.

Walt Whitman, renowned poet, appears with a handful of lilacs reminding us of his verse *When Lilacs last in the Dooryard Bloomed*. Whitman says: "I find myself always reminded of the great tragedy of that day by the sight and odour of these blossoms"

(Smith 2000, 38). His remark on Lincoln as the leading actor in the "Stormiest drama known to real history's stage through centuries" (Smith 2000, 38) contributes much to Smith's effort to theatricalise the power –press-sexuality discourse.

In the scenes associated with Lincoln, Smith makes elaborate use of video, slides and music to transform the performance space as a multimedia theatre. As the play *Our American Cousin* progresses on the backstage screen with sound effects, Booth appears. This episode is followed by Ben Bradlee's comments on the performative nature of contemporary politics in which performers reign supreme. Simultaneously Walt Whitman's character appears as a narrator of the assassination of President Lincoln. At the same time *Our American Cousin* is played out very loud in the background. This episode with its extensive dramatization of Lincoln's last moments in the Ford Theatre is twined with the movements of Booth as a shadow. In between Whitman's narration of the last moments of the President, a piece of dialogue from *Our American Cousin* is heard. The next scene presents, Lincoln as enjoying the play. The play which is loud in the background is abruptly stopped by a shot and the character of Lincoln bows over.

The Lincoln assassination episode achieves a sort of balance and serenity apart from emotional vehemence due to the montage organisation of the scenes. The effect seems to be a technique of alienation resulting in provoking the thoughts of the spectators. The assassination scene is immediately followed by author and activist Gloria Steinem's account of the political pandemonium that brought in Richard Nixon to White House. The turmoil was generated by three murders -- that of the two Kennedy's and that of Martin Luther King. King, according to Steinem, functioned as a bridge between a huge populist movement for justice and the system of power in U.S. When that bridge was broken, a crisis erupted in American politics, which paved the way for Richard Nixon

The next episode is set up as a sequel to that of Steinem, which is a report of the murder of J.F. Kennedy by Gov. Ann Richards who was attending a reception party of President Kennedy in Dallas at Apparel Mart. Ann Richards discusses the genesis of racism in Texas in the last century. The first act ends by drawing vivid pictures of moments in American history justifying Sturds Turkele's incapacity to define a single decisive moment in American history. The second act of *House Arrest* problematises the present day capital city for Washington D.C with its presidents, court people, political coups and with its complex relationship with the media. The capital and its people acquired a new language of power and terror which is incomprehensible to common folks in modern times. Smith goes on discussing the relationship between press and presidency with the help of a strange metaphor: prison house. "I had been told that the relationship of the press to the Presidency was one of captives. They are captives of each other. I know now that is not an appropriate metaphor. The fact of the situation for those who are incarcerated is that there's almost no way out" (Smith 2000a, 121). This idea is further emphasised with the stress on the language of Washington when Smith describes her visit to the Maryland Correctional Institute for Women. In this visit the prison for Smith "was also a strange relief from the intense masculinity of Washington" (Smith 2000a, 120). She found out that the language of the inmates was so much more energized and varied than the language of the status quo in Washington.

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