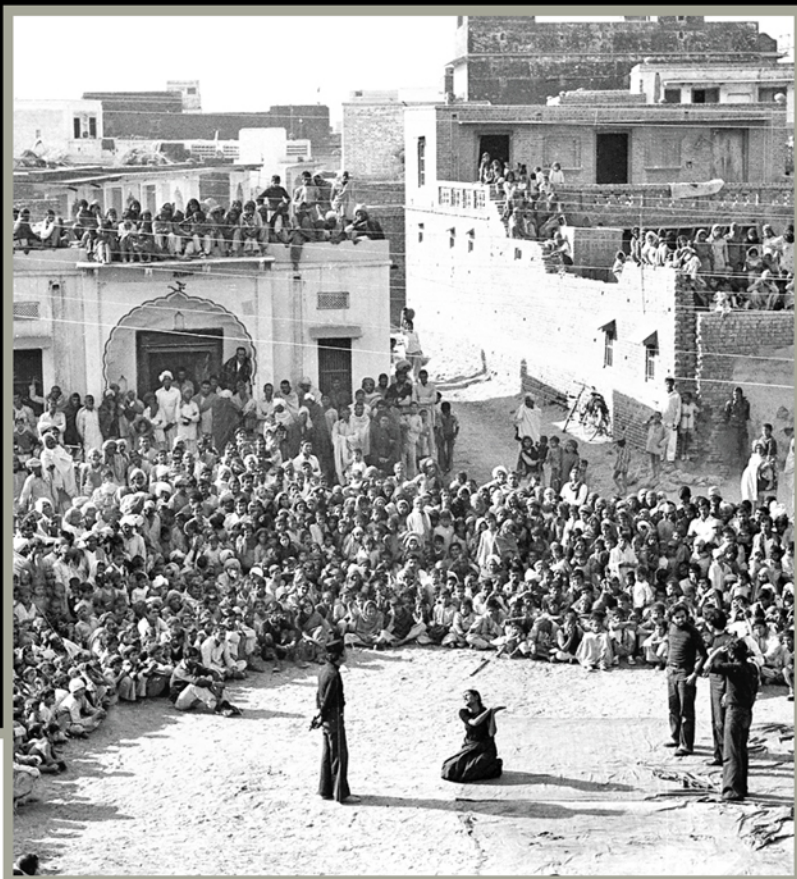


# FEMINIST VISIONS AND QUEER FUTURES IN POSTCOLONIAL DRAMA

Community, Kinship, and Citizenship



Kanika Batra

ROUTLEDGE

# **Feminist Visions and Queer Futures in Postcolonial Drama**

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*For my parents, Kimshuk, Puneet  
and for Rich*



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# Introduction

## Feminist Visions and Queer Futures

The postulate of a founding heterosexuality must also be read as part of the operation of power—and I would add fantasy—such that we can begin to ask how the invocation of such a foundation works in the building of a certain fantasy of state and nation.

(Judith Butler, “Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual” 124)

The scene is a gathering of about two hundred students seated in tiered rows in an open-air auditorium. There is a hushed silence as the performers dressed in black shirts circle the stage chanting rhythmically. The performance is by Jana Natya Manch (People’s Theatre Forum), a street theatre group invited to perform in a women’s college at the University of Delhi, India. The play, *Hinsa Parmo Dharm* (*Violence as Supreme Religion*), based on a short story by India’s foremost progressive writer, Munshi Premchand, depicts economic and gendered violence perpetrated by the nexus between religious fundamentalism and capitalism. I remember walking away amid groups of excited students animatedly discussing the performance wondering if classroom teaching ever generated such a response. Much like the play I saw performed that day, postcolonial Indian drama takes the social as the primary reason for its existence. This is evident not only in the themes central to contemporary drama written in various Indian languages but also in the goals of the state-funded National School of Drama, the country’s premier institute of theatre training and performance studies.<sup>1</sup>

A little known fact about theatre in India is the noncommercial basis of activities of the National School of Drama (NSD) which sometimes works in close collaboration with other state-supported organizations such as the Sangeet Natak Akademi or the Academy for Music and Dance and has followed “a consistent program of publication, preservation, and patronage, especially in relation to the ‘traditional’ theatre arts” even when “funds for new theatres, amateur companies, and theatre education have not materialized on the scale imagined in the first decade of independence” (Dharwardker 43–44). In keeping with these noncommercial aims the NSD and other cultural institutions such as the Shriram Arts Center and the Nehru Youth Centre in New Delhi conduct free summer theatre workshops for children. One of my most vivid memories of these activities is of a summer workshop conducted by the NSD in the mid-1990s. I remember the workshop director telling a boisterous group of children to enact a situation they cared about, and looked on in amazement as a twelve-year-old boy lay on the ground

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writhing in soundless agony. Asked to explain, he said that he was playing an old woman in pain, a person who had been abandoned by her family or perhaps did not have one to take care of her in her old age. Learning about the Jamaican theatre group, Sistren Theatre Collective many years later, the implicit connection between the enactment of an old woman in pain by a twelve-year-old child in India and Honor Ford-Smith's description of making plays dealing with real-life situations of poor, destitute, and old women in Jamaica provided the impetus for the transnational connections I was seeking.

My summer experiences at the children's theatre workshops over the course of a decade, the all-female audiences at performances such as the one by Jana Natya Manch in a Delhi University college, and my work with students-actors in women-centered plays, brought to the fore connections between social drama, performers, and their audiences. In many ways this book is an attempt to answer the questions I began asking about these experiences over a decade ago. As I read about and saw contemporary postcolonial drama in various metropolitan and nonmetropolitan settings I began to think about how drama, one of the most powerful mediums of conveying social concerns, has been deployed in India and other postcolonial nations to articulate gender justice. How do cultural and educational institutions such as schools of drama, colleges, and universities contribute performers and performance venues for socially progressive dramaturgy in postcolonial locations? What is the role of the postcolonial state in encouraging or curtailing the possibilities of socially inflected dramaturgy particularly if it explicitly critiques the state's gender policies? Is it possible to examine these performances as a form of 'citizenship education' that impacts on students and other audiences by shaping their views on pressing political issues of our times, among them the postcolonial state's reneged promise of gender justice to its citizens? How does the idea of the 'political' as gender justice connect feminist activism and postcolonial drama? In what ways and forms do postcolonial dramatists reflect on economic, gendered, and sexual violence and initiate a discussion on the situation of alternative sexualities, a contentious issue facing postcolonial feminists?

This book thinks through these some of these questions from a theoretical perspective informed by feminist, queer, and postcolonial studies. The comparisons charted in this book resonate with the key terms of Gayatri Spivak's call for "planetarity"—responsibility, community, citizenship, and pedagogy—as a model enabling the renewal of comparative literature in opposition to what is assumed to be self-explanatory globalization (*Death*). Encompassing a range of post-independence political, social, and cultural processes that may be analyzed comparatively, there is a productive tension between the various national contexts of my study and the implications for a particularly postcolonial mode of inquiry. I see the value of locally directed analyses as well as their implications within a comparative, cross-cultural framework. To this end, the first rationale for bringing together

Jamaican, Indian, and Nigerian contexts is chronological. The focus is on cultural activism and feminist organization in connection with specific forms of postcolonial governance between the 1970s and the 1990s, roughly corresponding with second- and third-wave feminist movements in these countries. This is a period also marked by theatre and feminist activists' engagement with the economic liberalization policies of neocolonial governments in India, Jamaica, and Nigeria.

The second rationalization for my selection of contexts and plays is a pedagogical imperative to examine similarities and differences in concerns addressed by cultural activists in nations that were often grouped together as the 'third world.' These are the basis of course offerings such as 'Twentieth Century Anglophone Drama', 'The Family in Postcolonial Literature', or even as general as topic as 'Contemporary Non-Western Literature' in the Euro-American academy. There are obvious cultural connections between Africa and the African Diaspora in the Americas; less recognized are campaigns to secure economic, gender, caste, class, and racial justice that connect social and cultural movements in Africa and the Caribbean to those in Asia and Latin America. These connections are often overshadowed by what Aijaz Ahmad calls the hegemony of literary translation and critical reception of Western texts in non-Western contexts and a concomitant neglect of the literary and political interfaces between non-Western literatures. While postcolonial studies has gone a long way in redressing this neglect, transnational connections between less studied genres, such as poetry and drama, can facilitate this interface.

Finally, the literary and political validation for this project is drawn from Helen Gilbert's summation of the *form* of recent postcolonial drama that "provokes the readers to consider how stylistic devices can articulate postcoloniality" since "the bias against naturalism is, in fact, fairly typical of the broader field from which these scripts are drawn." Gilbert argues, quite correctly, that "non-naturalistic theatre presumes a specific kind of relationship with its audience, one that avoids illusionism in favor of more explicit engagement with its interpretive community" (5). The plays analyzed in this book use structural devices associated with non-naturalistic drama to ensure critical engagement with spectatorial interpretive communities. Many of the playwrights also use rituals to comment on the inherently dramatic nature of everyday life and to disrupt the illusion of the theatrical experience by encouraging a critical mode of thinking. Of the non-naturalistic drama discussed in the book, some of the plays were created collectively while others were published under the name of individual playwrights. All the plays, whether collectively or individually conceptualized, are, I claim, 'performance events' that refer to political, economic, and social conditions of the times. Even the work published and performed under the names of an individual author rather than a collective carries the stamp of research collaboration. And in some cases the authors directly acknowledge the communities with whom they interacted