



MEDIATIZATION AND THE MARGINS OF DEMOCRACY: A CASE OF PERFORMATIVE INTRODUCTIONS

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

In turbulent times of power and presidency, renowned solo theatre performer Anna Deavere Smith engaged herself with American Presidency through a spectacular performance piece *House Arrest*. Smith's prime objective was to study the character of President and this has become a hectic effort because the very image of the President in the public is menacingly mediated. As Smith has aptly pointed out: "Most of us view the president as a product of a camera lens" (Smith 2000a, 100). The mass mediational systems create and recreate and bring out images of the President as an institutionalised practice. The result is that the process of seeing the President has become a process of participating in the mechanisms of production of characters and images in the media.

The second part of Act II brings in a controversy regarding the lesbian behaviour shown by two women in a White House party in which President Clinton was present. A variety of arguments are presented through the characters of Graydon Carter, Judith Butler and an anonymous man about the event. Graydon Carter, editor of *Vanity Fair*, invited television actress and celebrity Ellen DeGeneres to the White House correspondent's dinner in 1997. Guests can bring their celebrity friends and DeGeneres brought in her girl friend Anne Heche. Smith witnessed the presence of these two women with their arms around each other catching the attention of participants: "Apparently they displayed more affection than many thought was appropriate" (Smith 2000a, 173). When Graydon Carter brought these women to meet the President, they approached the President with their arms around each other. People

expressed displeasure in their behaviour but what amazed Smith was that this event appeared in the editorial of *The New York Times* the next day. Smith finds it as a critical moment in the history of press because a newspaper like *The New York Times* writes an editorial on this issue in which only a microscopic minority is involved in. One of Smith's major concerns in *House Arrest* is to throw light upon the infatuation of the press with celebrities life, especially when they are associated in any way with the Presidency.

Smith met Graydon Carter, editor of *Vanity Fair* himself to get his response on the issue. "For him it was all fun. When I asked him about the *New York Times* editorial, I felt like some kind of a fuddy-duddy" (Smith 2000a, 175). In *House Arrest* the character of Carter appears with the same imported cigarettes and simply dismisses power and presidency from his world. "It's the most uptight place in the world . . . I'd be just too terrified, if it's all built on power uh / like / if I lost my job tomorrow, I'd be / I'd be unhappy / but I certainly this is you know / it wouldn't ruin my life. / But I think if you lost your big job in Washington, its over / You gotta leave" (Smith 2000, 57). Graydon Carter himself is sitting on top of a mountain of power since *Vanity Fair* defines the hierarchies in the fashion world.

In one of the sessions of *House Arrest*, 'Sending the Canaries into the Mines' throws light upon the inquisitorial system functioning hideously by grinding out any move against the chilling political status quo in Washington. The characters presented in this section are three intelligent women who in three different circumstances underwent the torment of outliving the terror of inquisitions in Washington. They are Anita Hill, a professor of law,

former chief of staff of Mrs. Clinton; Maggie Williams and Secretary of Labour Alexis Herman.

The Secretary of Labour Alexis Herman finds it funny to be labelled as a 'Washington insider'. Being a black woman she is "on the outside looking trying to bring down the walls, bring down the barriers" (Smith 2000, 59). These three women are presented in *House Arrest* as people of extreme dignity and composure. "Inside their (Hill, Williams, Herman) dignity and composure, Smith catches, with wonderful precision, their differently distraught responses to the White male thuggishness that has now become the basic behavioral trait of American Politics" (Feingold 2000, 74). Smith's attempt is to analyse a specific nature of the system of power in Washington through the experience of 'lie detecting' and the powerful undercurrent of the ideology of white masculinity shaping and reshaping consistently the political system in America.

The metaphors of incarceration Smith brought in through her experience of the Maryland Correctional Institute for Women are further emphasised by Ed Bradley's observations on the White House as a place for captives. In the IV sections of the II Act of *House Arrest*, Ed Bradley defines the press and the Presidency as captives of each other. Smith brought in a number of Washington based journalists, intellectuals and prison mates, not politicians to set up the political theatre in Washington. This effort signals Smith's intense understanding that the people outside the political scene have a special kind of energy and expressiveness in their speech patterns. A speech pattern with a trochee in the second beat is most expressive and vigorous for Smith. This idea of 'trochee in the second beat' evolved through the experience of thousands of interviews conducted by Smith and by close examination of the audiotapes of such interviews. "The problem is, politicians are not allowed trochees in the second beat. They're scared stiff in to iambs. It's the columnists like Hitchens and others and talk show hosts and radio hosts, and comics in this melange of press / media / entertainment et cetera, who have the trochees" (Smith 2000a, 105). Most of the politicians with their copy book speech performances are afraid of employing their original rhythms of speech.

Smith with her vocal coach listened carefully to the

audio tapes of the interviews conducted by her as a part of the rehearsal process of the performance. The most striking aspect of the audio tapes was that the women incarcerated had an immensely more free vocal expression and range than the journalists, other press people, political figures and others related to the White House. "The voice of the Washington insiders tended to be constrained in one place or another, the prisoners had full range, and especially full use of the lower parts of their bodies" (Smith 2000a, 47). Smith observes this capability as an inner working of the voice to find freedom when the person is physically bound.

Smith's longing for natural speech rhythms after her innumerable experiences with Washington insiders led to a search for an irreverent character among the sophisticated political / media figures. She found in James Callender of Jefferson's times a prototype of characters who lacked reverence. Smith's search for an irreverent character in contemporary press / politics / entertainment ended up in Christopher Hitchens, journalist of *Vanity Fair*.

After having been in Washington for a while, and having interviewed a few hundred people, I began to long for an interviewee who lacked reverence I found my modern day Callender in Christopher Hitchens. I was amazed at his likeness with James Callender. Callender was Scottish, Hitchens, English. Both were irreverent. Both felt they had nothing to lose in terms of moving against the grain of the status quo. (Smith 2000a , 104)

The character of Hitchens is located outside the balance between the press and the presidency which evolved from their captiveness to each other.

The central episode in Act II is the section titled "Political theatre" in which president Clinton's character is performed. This performance piece is preceded by Smith's appearance as the Grand Jury asking questions about Clintons' controversial sexual congress with the intern, Monika Lewinsky. In the background, there is the slide of Clinton's appearance in front of the Grand Jury. Smith had conducted a 35 minutes interview with Clinton for this

episode. But it was before the Monica Lewinsky controversy.

Smith accompanied the presidential campaign as a News reporter and travelled in the Air Force – I with the President. Later she performed *Twilight: Los Angeles 1992* for the President at the Ford Theatre, Washington where Abraham Lincoln was shot. The interview with Clinton was actually the culmination of all interviews conducted by Smith for the *House Arrest* project.

Performing Clinton in the *House Arrest* project is one of the greatest challenges because the President's character is most microscopically covered by the media. Moreover, the image of the President transmitted to the public is by and large constructed by the media. In such circumstances Smith's effort is to perform the character without feathers and decorations exactly as he is.

The conversation began at the Oval office with "How you doing, girl" as if he were "talking to an old pal" (Smith 2000a, 244). In Smith's view Clinton's articulation and body language are entirely different and she finds it as "a different kind of music" (Smith 2000a, 245). During the interview many a staff attempted to stop the President to give his voice some rest. But he continued speaking vibrantly with taking so many postures. Smith says, "sometimes he was barely getting his breath. There was an urgency – even though it was just he and I. He was on a roll. He had a wider range of expression than most of the people I had interviewed" (2000a, 246). For Smith, Clinton's energetic features in conversation are peculiar to very expressive people. The President's excessively performative expressiveness ironically hints at the captivity in the White House because he is the most affected victim of the captivity of White House. "I had to do a very intense kind of listening to absorb it all. My tape recorder would never absorb this. Technology makes flat renderings and it requires that we deliver flat performances" (Smith 2000a, 248). Smith performed Clinton before the Monica Lewinsky scandal and after. For her, "It was harder to play it after. I was working against the disbelief of the audience" (296). Smith makes use of a different kind of lighting to perform Clinton so that she can present herself away from the audience. She attempted to perform the President from two

vantage points: one that of power and the other that of powerlessness.

The next section of *House Arrest* is titled 'Moral Slippage', a term taken from Sturds Turkele's introductory piece which presents a range of characters from President George Bush to the incarcerated child murderer in the Maryland Correctional Institute for Women. Smith met president Bush in the summer of 1997. In a big room across the White House he sat with an orange crush soda on ice with his jacket off and tie loosened. He has been eating two huge chocolate chip cookies made specially for him by the white house chef. It is believed that he has been too intimate with the press and he used to invite journalists. But Bush spoke to Smith about the press with irreverence.

The last part, 'One Card at a Time' consists of two pieces: one by Blese Canty and the other by Sturds Turkele. Turkele's remarks about a world dominated by mechanical devices that shape human lives are proper conclusions of the issues debated in *House Arrest*. "In old days you had robots / the robots imitated humans / now you have human imitating robots" (Smith 2000, 81-82). His anguish, "We're more and more into communications and less and less into communication" (Smith 2000a, 83) reflects the horror of deleting the human element from the heavily masculine and overpowering systems of politics and media.

Smith quoted the words of Jack Germond in *Talk to Me* to show the degeneration of contemporary politics: "This is – this is all – this is all show big now. These – there's – there's nothing for them to tell you . . . the decisions are made in a different way." (2000a, 214). The world of politics like the world of media and fashion, is dehumanised and deteriorated to the farthest end. To elucidate this, Smith described the inauguration day of Clinton's second term in 1997 where among many celebrities Kevin Costner was present. "A group of soldiers in formal dress and in formation were marching by. One of them noticed Kevin Costner and broke out of formation, gesturing wildly, pointing and mouthing 'That's Kevin Costner.' ... celebrity caused them to leave their posts" (Smith 2000a, 221). This event denotes the gradual merging up of the political apparatus and the celebrity culture, two streams prevalent in contemporary America. George

Stephano Poulouse's remark that the President is the celebrity in-chief defines the full circle of deterioration of contemporary political culture.

Smith has conducted a remarkable quantity of research in analysing the present day political theatre in America which projects the president as the centre of the big show. She substantiates the dubious relationship of the Presidency with media by making solid references to the history of media communication. Jefferson's and Lincoln's eras represent the state before the presentation of the spoken word and the technology of moving pictures. Present day presidency is exactly what is mediated through the camera lenses.

The concluding piece in *House Arrest* by Sturds Turkele titled 'Communication' brings into sharp relief all major issues projected in the work to a common ground for debate. The 'communication revolution', for Turkele defines a moment of crisis in contemporary history. This crisis is most immediately effected in the complex community-scape of Washington. The whole project seems to centre around the inability of a highly mediated community to 'communicate'.

The seminal role of the history of communication Technology and the ideology of medialisation in *House Arrest* hint at the pivotal role of the inability of a heavily mediated community to 'communicate'. This vision of the failure of communication embraces many views of Jean Baudrillard, an exponent of media studies in post modern era. Baudrillard defined mass media as a speech without response. The mass media is characterized by an opposite impulse to communication. His arguments are made on the pretext of the definition that "communication is an exchange and a reciprocal space of speech and response and therefore of responsibility" (1998, 207). Being a system without response, intransitive and insensitive, mass media makes the process of communication impossible. The system of social control and power is founded on the very ideology of mass media. The community in Washington D.C, the epicentre of power politics figured in *House Arrest* as a community where the process of communication is paralyzed.

All these evidences substantially challenge the

presence of a community in the conventional sense in Washington. Destruction of the community and the eclipse of the 'social' are the hallmarks of a highly mediated society in which the 'social' implodes, as Baudrillard observes it (1988, 207). The concept of community suggests the salience of identity and participation together with proximity, unity and place (Delanty 2000, 115). The community stands in order to resist the fragmentation of the social. Trust, solidarity and autonomy are considered to be the most fundamental dimensions of a community and they are characterized by an emotional dimension (Delanty 2000, 118). Community, therefore, is a cognitive structure, based on the process of communication. As Karl-Otto Apel argued, the idea of community hints at the very process of communication itself as a self-transcending community of those engaged in critical reflection. Reflexivity of communication is defined as a seminal characteristic of community. (Delanty 2000, 123). These basic assumptions of a community are severally contested in the society where Smith made her investigations for *House Arrest*.

Non-communication, designed and imposed by mass media is prevailing in Washington. The innumerable models produced by simulation without origin or reality are transmitted everywhere. The state of 'hyper real' suggested by Baudrillard (1988, 166-67) emanates in these circumstances. Therefore the community in Washington is a product of the fragmentation of the social and the disintegration of the mass culture.

In *House Arrest* Anna Deavere Smith is curious in locating her characters in the matrices of power and history by inventing contemporary communication and mass media as an apparatus of subjection. The characters are performed with a close reference to the formative discourses of subjectivities. Smith's strategy is not to forge the subject positions, but to highlight and relocate positions by interrogating the structures of power and history. In *House Arrest*, Smith triumphs in representing characters in the exact locations of constitution and regulation of subjectivities in the context of the complex relationship between power media and sexuality.

Works Cited:

Apel, Karl-Otto. (1998) *Towards a Transformation of*

Philosophy. Marquette University Press.

Baudrillard, Jean and Marie Maclean. (1985) "Implosion of the Social in the Media" *New Literary History* Vol. 16, No. 3, On Writing Histories of Literature. Spring, 577-589. The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Delanty, Gerard. (2000) *Modernity and Postmodernity*. New Delhi: Sage Publication.

Feingold, Michael. 2000. "Power Steering." *The Village Voice*. New York: April 4.

Smith Anna Deavere . 2000. *House Arrest*. Manuscript from Smith's Personal Collection.

--- . 2000a. *Talk To Me: Listening Between the Lines* New York: Random House.