Chapter Six

In the Panopticon:
Intermeshings of Power, Media and Sexuality
in *House Arrest*

In the fall of 1993, while Anna Deavere Smith was performing *Fires in the Mirror* in Arena Theatre, Washington D.C., she expressed her desire to "do something on the President." Smith’s desire was prompted specifically because of her conviction that "If I’m really doing a search for American character, sooner or later I should look at the President" (Smith 2000a, 100). When the Arena Stage commissioned her to accomplish the project on American Presidency in 1996, she became convinced of the major elements that regulate the discourse of political power in the United States. Mass media came through as a historical factor in perpetuating the image of the President to the public. As Smith observed, "I know nothing about the President that the press doesn’t tell me. I can’t really look at the president without looking at the press" (2000a, 100). The resultant work *House Arrest* envisions the President and all subjects in the political apparatus as prisoners in a great prison house.

*House Arrest* signals a remarkable transition in Smith’s career by subverting the nature and structure of the work into an investigation into
the ethical and political challenges that a nation encounters rather than the inward crises of a particular community or a region. This sea-change in the project is mainly due to the absence of a ‘community’ in which various opinions, truths, rituals, religions and lies clash together to form a debating ground. Though Washington D.C is a geographic reality, it lacks the kind of social tensions and cacophony present in Crown Heights and South Central Los Angeles.

When the performance project centred around American Presidency took shape, Smith was forced to integrate many aspects of contemporary mass culture and American history into that effort. *House Arrest* consequently has become a crucial investigation into the political culture and cultural politics of America, with a profound understanding of the discourse of power and the multiplicity of ways it operates microscopically. As a part of this performative exploration, Smith re- visioned American history, which is inexplicably blended with the problematic of race, sexuality and power, with an emphatic reference to the various facets of communication technology. The three faces of American Presidency represented by Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln and Bill Clinton are brought to the epicentre of the performance with the assistance of a number of historical documents including Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia* and an array of audio, video
materials. Smith incorporated excerpts from her interviews with Bill Clinton, press reporters, media professionals, prisoners, academics, politicians, and many others.

The *House Arrest* project signals seminal differences in the adaptation of the context, performance strategy and especially in the intertwining of the complex realms of power, race, sexuality and media, as far as the other works in the *On the Road* project are concerned. As Dorinne Kondo, one of the four dramaturges of Smith’s *Twilight: Los Angeles 1992*, observed: “the scope of the play expanded far beyond the deconstruction of a single urban crisis to encompass centuries of U.S. history told via non-linear juxtaposition, from Jefferson to Lincoln to the present” (2000, 87). The encroachment and intertwining of various histories associated with the power-sexuality mass media relationship in the complex community-scape of Washington D.C make *House Arrest* an extremely problematic project.

**A Work in Progress: Three Productions**

There are three major productions of *House Arrest*. The Arena Stage, Washington D.C., production in 1997 was titled as *House Arrest: The Press and the Presidency*. The Mark Taper Forum workshop production in 1999 was entitled *House Arrest: An Introgression*. Both there productions were performed with a twelve-person cast of African-
American, Latino, White and Asian actors including Anna Deavere Smith, who played across the borders of race and gender. In spite of these multiracial collaborations, the Joseph Papp New York Public Theatre production of House Arrest in 2000 March was performed as a one woman show.

House Arrest: An Introgression was originally scheduled as a full production as part of Mark Taper Forum’s ‘Theatre Sessions.’ The proposed schedule was altered when it became clear that Smith could not realise the work fully in the wake of the impeachment of President Clinton. The impeachment controversy erupted after the Washington’s Arena Stage version of House Arrest. In lieu of the critical responses hinting at the unfinished nature of the work, Smith reconsidered the whole project and re-wrote the play for the Mark-Taper Forum. Eventually, Smith and Artistic director Gordon Davidson decided to present the project as a work in progress. “The drama is being titled as a work-in-progress, a compressed version of the production that had originally been scheduled to run at the Taper this spring. Critics have been asked not to review the production until the final performance” (Braxton 1999, d-I). In these two early versions of House Arrest, Smith maintained the status of a work in progress. The very title of the Mark Taper Form production, House Arrest: An Introgression,
emphasises the process of shaping the performance. The word ‘introgression,’ for Smith is a biological term describing “what happens when species leave their natural habitats and move on to other’s turf” (1999, d-1). The title signifies many things beyond the nature of the performance as a work in progress.

In the Mark Taper Forum production, the two hour long first act attempted to draw parallels between various Presidencies and their relationship to mass media on the one hand. On the other, it elaborated a number of issues such as church burning in South, Racism, interracial sexual congress and Smith’s own experience with ‘policing’ in Washington (Smith 2000a, 166-167). Abraham Zapruder’s Film on Kennedy assassination with many other visuals was exhibited in the background of the stage. Smith appeared mostly by herself, providing interesting details of her journey into the epicentre of power politics during the production process of House Arrest. She performed two characters: Historian Sturds Turkele and President Clinton during the production. The post-performance discussion was an inseparable part of this production where the spectators interacted with the performers and the major issues evinced in the discussions were race, power, gender politics and press.
In this ambitious project that explored the political psyche of America, critics and reviewers complained that they missed Smith’s spectacular presence on the stage. Consequently George C. Wolfe, the producer of Joseph Papp New York Public Theatre, suggested to Smith that “if she bring the show to New York, she should do it alone” (Pogrebin 2000, 11). Hence *House Arrest* appeared as a one-woman show in which Smith performed Presidents, media professionals, historians, politicians and academics in a manner she performed *Twilight: Los Angeles 1992* and *Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights Brooklyn and Other Identities*.

This version of *House Arrest* has the structure of a conventional drama with two acts and an intermission of fifteen minutes between the acts. It took place with George C. Wolfe as producer, Rose Marie Tichler as Artistic Director and Mark Levin as managing director. In his invitation to theatre goers on the eve of the premiere of *House Arrest*, George C. Wolfe described the performance as follows: “As the candidates (candidates for the presidential polls 2000) debate the issue before the American public, the American public debates the issue of the Presidency – what it means to us historically, politically, culturally” (Wolfe, 2000). By creating a montage of characters from various facets
of American history, Smith defines the contours of power that alleviates individuals from their socio-political settings in *House Arrest*.

**Lessons of the Labyrinth: The Interviews**

Smith decided to conduct interviews for *House Arrest* bearing in mind the complexities of the community she was going to encounter. In almost all performances in *On the Road* series, especially in *Fires in the Mirror* and *Twilight: Los Angeles*, the idea about whom to interview was clear and specific because there was the presence of members of the corresponding communities directly and actively engaged in the community life. Due to an excessive sense of community often the subjects voluntarily came forward to the interviewer or at least it was very easy to approach them. But in *House Arrest* due to problematic of community-scape and the complexity of issues, Smith experienced intense difficulties in identifying her subjects. Moreover, *House Arrest* as a work in progress, its scope and boundaries yet to be defined, the interview process became further troublesome. Smith was forced to consider the names of leading politicians, journalists, intellectuals and celebrities due to the centrality of power and media and the shrouded relationship between them in the project.

Smith could not find an imperfect sentence, a raged tone of voice or an emotionally charged word, which evinces nuances during
performance, except in the Maryland Correctional Institute for Women.

"At first it seemed as though speech would never fail the people I met there. They seemed to have themselves quite well covered in speech. It was harder to find them in any type of verbal undress. It was harder to find grammatical error, which had for me always been an indication that character was victorious over speech" (Haithman 1999, 1). These observations elicit the view that the interviewees themselves excelled in the act of performing their schemes in a well-trained, pre-meditated manner. The concept of documentary theatre itself encounters severe challenges with these subjects because Smith’s search for character was accomplished when the subject leaps into ungrammatical, disordered and broken sentences. The nature of the people Smith found out in Washington as interviewees was very much evident in a story told to Smith about a major character in House Arrest, the President himself. "I was told stories of journalists sitting around videos inspecting, as if under a microscope, every bit of his linguistic behaviour. And they turned that microscope towards the camera and gave the nation a chance to look in too" (1999, 1). When Smith came to be aware that everything she knew about the President was through the lens of the media, an investigation into the mass media became a prerequisite to analyse presidency.
For various reasons, sometimes due to the likes and dislikes of such people and sometimes due to their biases and attitudes towards Smith and her work, she found difficulties in arranging the interviews.

"The first thing I would need is a grant to take care of the lunches, breakfasts and dinners of my subjects. They liked to meet in fancy places" (Smith 2000a, 112). In the case of many subjects, Smith has to pay fees for the interviews. She found it "expensive to get people to talk to you in Washington" (2000a, 126). Various problems related to arranging the interviews were resolved when Smith hired a consultancy firm, Powell – Tate to arrange the interviews.

Smith encountered another problem when she approached people to co-operate with her as interviewees. Many White women, journalists and celebrities who were otherwise good collaborators refused to be interviewed by Smith. As Gloria Steinem and Barbara Johnson of Harvard University suggest, the problem is due to a kind of muteness that emerges from the fragility of whiteness in women. They are afraid of any alteration of identity in any case and hence "being a character in your play means being in a different position in the story than I’m in now. I’m trying to maximise my position, and you want me to be in a different position in a different story? No thanks" (2000a, 128).
Smith’s crew for the central activity of the *House Arrest* project—interviews consisted of a variety of people from diverse fields united by the intuitive nature of Smith’s work. Nora, a graduate student of history at Berkley, Andrews, an expert in history and theatre from Amherst, Erine from Yale, Matthew, Smith’s former student from Stanford and Cori, the researcher of the project, constituted the crew. In spite of the four dramaturges in *Twilight: Los Angeles*, who constituted the theoretical framework to represent interracial communication, this crew formulated a schedule consisting of interviews, visits, election campaign reporting and research.

One of the major resources of the Arena stage theatre production of *House Arrest* was the presidential election campaign of 1996 of both the Republican and Democratic camps. Smith has decided to follow the election campaigns and conventions in order to see at close quarters the realm of political power as well as the press.

**Panoptic Visions: *House Arrest* in Performance**

The text used in this chapter for discussion is the manuscript provided by Anna Deavere Smith from her personal collection based on the New York Public Theatre version of *House Arrest*. Act 1 of the NYPT production has three sections titled ‘Seeing and Being Seen,’ ‘Cohabitation’ and ‘The Grand Death of the Race’ in that order. Forty-
two characters were performed in this version from four hundred interviews conducted by Smith.

The first episode in this manuscript shows the African-American historian Studs Turkele's observations on the "defining moment in American history." As Turkele unveils his myriad experiences with various Presidents, Smith asks the questions voice over: "What's the defining moment in American history?" Turkele fails to establish a single defining moment in American history but identifies a combination of many important moments that constituted American character and experience.

It is a combination of many

I can't think of any one moment I'd say is the defining moment.

But the gradual slippage... moral slippage

It's a gradual kind of thing.

A combination of things

(Smith2000, 1).

The 'slippage' is a process that encompasses moments such as Hiroshima, Vietnam, Slavery, Watergate, Clinton-Lewinsky and many other. Studs Turkele's episode functions as an introductory session for Smith's explorations of the complex relationship of power, media and
sexuality in the wake of community’s communication failure because it describes the intervention of each of these elements in American history as a process.

The second episode, ‘The Deal’ discloses the immensely publicised and mediatised private life of the President with unlimited powers. Smith performed George Stephano Poulase, former assistant to the President, with a martini glass in hand. He says: “We’re a celebrity culture and the President is the celebrity in chief” (2000, 5). Stephano Poulase describes the most publicised life of the President, transparent to the media among servants, interns, security and other staffers. The whole thing is ‘wired’ so that the security can examine the movements of individuals inside the house. “You can do whatever you want. The prize is that everybody is going to know everything you do” (2000: 5). Similarly Bob Rainer’s film The American President in which Smith herself enacted the role of the press secretary to the President, shows us how an affair of the president has become a matter of concern for the whole nation.

Emphasising the fragmentary nature of the work, Smith described her visit to President Jefferson’s home at Montecello in which she found Cinder Staton, the official historian of Montecello. Staton finds a connection between the words ‘Panoptic’ and ‘Pantops’, the name
given to one of Jefferson's farms to associate the concept of Panopticism to 'Presidency.' Panoptic means "all seeing" and "all seen." "They are all seeing or being seen by everyone" (2000, 7). The concept of 'Panoptic' was theoretically developed by Michel Foucault to signify modern structures of power in his *Discipline and Punish*. The President is shown as a victim of his own privileges and powers by placing him in a panoptic position.

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 ‘d rapetomania,’ 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,
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 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).

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” (Smith 2000a, 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.

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.

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. These stories appeared in a Federalist newspaper: “Callender, who is alcoholic / which is not a condition unfamiliar with those in our nations capital /
turned against Jefferson and wrote . . . history about Sally Hemmings. No one’s ever proved it. No one’s ever disproved it” (Smith 2000, 10).

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 cent certainty / 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 Hemings 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 New York 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 *New York Times* named Bob Post. There were ‘unaskable’ questions to the President in Roosevelt's 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 McGuffie's 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 sensationalise 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. Here 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 Turkle’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.

In such circumstances, Smith's prime objective, to study the character of President, becomes a hectic effort because the very image of the President in the public is a mediatised one. 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.

Section III of Act II, ‘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 iamb. 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: LosAngeles 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 Poulose’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 mediatised 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 mediatised 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.

**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 her ‘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, a 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 Harvard 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 communitiescape 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.

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 mediatised 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.