Chapter One

Introduction

Then with a shout we rushed upon him and locked our arms about him; but the ancient god had not forgotten his craft and cunning. He became in turn a bearded lion, a snake, a panther, a monstrous boar; then running water, then a towering and leafy tree, but we kept our hold, unflinching and undismayed, and in the end this master of dreaded secrets began to tire. So he broke into speech . . .

The Odyssey IV, 384 ff.

Proteus, the ancient sea-deity, granted Menelaus a way of escape from the Egyptian Island of Pharos after successive transformations into a number of natural forms. This mythical episode resembles precisely a moment in contemporary theatre where the performer is trapped and tied within the community to assume creative transformations. The performer renowned for her ‘Protean style’ is Anna Deavere Smith, whose work defies all classifications such as drama, community theatre, social drama and journalism. With a Protean mastery, Anna Deavere
Smith puts herself into the shoes of real life characters of a community in pursuit of resolutions at a moment of crisis.

When Smith performs real life characters after interviewing them and editing their utterances with simple costume changes and histrionic transformations, the spectators including the interviewees themselves experience subtle transcendence of boundaries of race, gender, sexuality, age and class. These category crossings through the transracial, transgender performatives are crucial in defining a contemporary, progressive, cultural politics of the postmodern for it contests all hegemonic practices of representation.

Smith's work offers a resistant, open-ended narrative which relies largely on discontinuity, quotation and pastiche, thereby critiquing the liberal humanist definition of truth. The performances in On the Road: A Search For American Character series disrupt conventions of form and context by representing identities – be it racial or sexual – in a fluid and negotiable manner. This particular aspect of her performative approach to communities offers translucent narrative, which resists transparency and authenticity of meaning and interpretation. The production and reception of these protean performatives aim at achieving divergence and plurality rather than convergence and coherence. The result, consequently, is a totally disjointed and
fragmentary performance scheme developed into a critical and social tool and as an embodied moment of theory and practice.

The contemporary reality of multiple, simultaneously existing actualities is registered profoundly in Smith's work. This is effected by her technical virtuosity in working with a documentary base. The performative fluidity and theoretical ability to portray many characters from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds signal Smith's engagement with popular culture and mass media, specifically in the adaptation of T.V. news broadcasts and on-the-spot reports.

In conjuring up the extreme fluidity of contemporary social, cultural and political identities, Smith employs a rigorous sort of slippery identity through shape-shifting and morphing on the stage. The performative logic of Smith's work lies in her ability to create mobile identities enmeshed within clan, religion, age, region, class and dialect. The staccato language, the non-consequential logic of narrative, rapid disjunctions and shifts make the production of unitary and coherent identities in performance impossible.

Smith re-presents her subjects at the interface of genders, class and race differences by unravelling the subjectivities on the stage. The subject in performance is a floating-subject which escapes the shackles of modernist and essentialist logic. This results in opening up the
spectator's critical faculties to a plethora of interpretations and
cnumberless resolutions. Hence Smith’s performing field is an eccentric
space, both inside and outside the historical constructs of sexual, gender
and radical identities. In essence, Smith’s performances invite the
spectator to both theorise and problematise identities by thwarting any
effort to arrive at ideological or biological conclusions. This is most
evident in her total demystification and subversion of sexist and racist
stereotyped representations produced and imposed by hegemonic
systems of culture to perpetuate itself. These provocatively ambiguous,
multifaceted and open-ended performances both challenge and
undermine such representational practices.

Smith’s decade long performance project On the Road: A Search
for American Character pivots around certain epistemological and
political concerns regarding representation of racial and gender
identities in the American context. Therefore, the complexities of post
capitalist economic surroundings, post civil rights ethos, anti-affirmative
action campaigns, increased racial mixing, rapid shifts in immigration
policy, changing demographics and increasing racial violence are
brought to the sharp focus of the project.

The On the Road project commenced as an interactive theatrical
endeavour that investigates the manifold crises within communities. The
cultural milieu of America in the 80’s confronted Smith with a series of challenges, as far as the question of representing identities in community is concerned. Smith’s theatrical project in communities which seek self-reflexive action took shape during a period when many social institutions and communities were “going through identity shifts” with regard to gender, race and ethnicity” (Smith 1993, xxxiii).

Smith’s exploration of characters as emblematized in her ‘search for American character’ through her protean performatives ultimately resulted in redefining the essentialist categories of race, gender, ethnicity, class and religion as contested domains with shifting borders. These transgender, transracial performances specifically appealed to the shifting terrains of race, gender, masculinity, geopolitics and heteronormativity. In an effort to express the voices of people from the margins, such as women of colour, people of colour, gays, Latinos and Asians, Smith’s performances primarily revealed the fragility of essentialist social categorisations and the limits of contemporary debates on race, gender and ethnicity. The characters Smith performed on the stage were those who were either denied access to and expression in popular media and mainstream artistic institutions or those who were represented only as stereotypes.
The problematic of representation as evinced in the performative practices of Smith enforces us to explore the formative process of racial, ethnic and sexual subjectivities in the wake of post-structuralist theoretical contexts and assumptions about the performative aspect of identities. In this light, identities in performance are manifested, as constituted through the matrices of power with a sharp focus on the interpellations of the subjectivity. Smith’s protean performatives explore the hegemonic structures of power through which racial, gender, sexual and ethnic identities are seen as interpellations of the subject, without any regard to race, gender, or sexuality.

Transgressions of Identity: Culture and Performance

The essentialist notion of ‘identity’ is fundamentally and severally challenged by Smith’s ‘identity crossings’ in performance. Dorinne Kondo described this phenomenon prevalent in Smith’s works as “border transgressions” (2000, 86). What is at stake is the performative transgressions of borders of identity and its blurring boundaries. This problematic is most lucidly emblematised in Smith’s presentation of the character ‘Twilight’ in Twilight Los Angeles 1992: “Twilight is that time of day between day and night… . I am stuck in limbo the way the sun is stuck between night and day in the twilight hours” (Smith 1994, 253). Twilight hour represents a social and cultural milieu where identities
and their signification and social meanings are in a fluid and shifting state.

The concept of borders of identity evokes a sense of impermeability, distinction, fixation, demarcation, exclusion and alienation. At the same time, borders also suggest permeability, contamination and creolisation because identities are constantly shifting shapes in the present cultural context. Therefore borders of identity can also be conceived as imaginary, ever-changing, fluid and contested. Identities in representation are increasingly crossing, subversive and transgressive in multicultural communities emerging in the wake of diasporic moves, massive demographic shifts and increasing racial and ethic mixing. As a result, a new rhetoric of ‘identity’ which is permeable, fluid and transgressive is prevailing in the fixed terrains of essentialist identity politics which is known as racial and ethnic ‘absolutism’ as Paul Gilroy puts it in his *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*.

Anna Deavere Smith, throughout her *On the Road: A Search for America Character* projects maintained the view that identities are in transgression and in transformation. Identities are staged in this performance project by theatrically highlighting the border zones of identities without obliterating difference. At the same time the
authenticity of presenting identities in a shifting manner is achieved by interviewing and performing real life people with a steady emphasis on the potentials of mimicry. This process of documenting and performing individuals by observing closely their mannerisms, speech, costumes and body language is a bid to articulate the failure of essentialist categories of identity. Smith rigorously brought in the notion of shifting identities in the context of post identity cultural context where identities are permeable and transgressive. This effort opens up a ground for debate on contemporary transgressions and subversions of identity. Using the words, gestures and language of her interviewees, Smith journeys from one character to another, getting into their skins in a cunningly theatrical manner, simultaneously evincing a kind of alienation effect that enables the spectator to take various positions during the performance.

Smith’s presence as a performer is a vehicle for her characters and her performing body is a medium of eliciting differences. In many of her community based works in On the Road project, Smith performed with a telephone receiver in hand, in conference halls, small meeting places and classrooms. “Smith’s presence as the receiver of the call was a pivotal critical presence, an important but mercurial reference which cued the audience as to how they might respond to what they were
hearing” (Martin, C. 1996, 85). She illustriously imitated the people she interviewed and simultaneously enacted the role of the receiver of the calls. Smith enters into the skins of others, inhabits them during the performance, but does not become the other. In this effort of ‘acting out’ others, her performing body produces certain kind of ambiguity as it embodies the social meanings of male, female, white, black, brown, yellow, Latino, Asian and Chicano identities. One can argue here that Smith’s mimetic performance strategy empowered with the transgressive potential of her performing body denaturalises cultural identities.

The denaturalisation of identities and the distortion of the markers of cultural identity are most lucidly illustrated by Smith in the episode entitled ‘Hair’ in Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn and Other Identities. Here an anonymous young girl, the Reverend Al Sharpton and Rivkah Siegal (a Lubavitcher housewife) bring into sharp relief the problematic of a marker of cultural identity: hair. The significations of ‘hair arrangement’ as a marker of their cultural identity is brought to the sharp focus in their reflexions on the multiple dimensions of everyday life. The anonymous young girl is Black and therefore her hairstyle is associated with her racial identity in the multiracial high school classes. Reverend Al Sharpton says that he had
straightened his hair not to imitate White's hairstyle, but by the influence of James Brown, his mentor. Rivkah Siegal demonstrates the ambivalence of wearing wigs (following the Lubavitcher tradition of hiding women's hair beneath a wig) because wearing / not wearing a wig is crucial to her existence as Lubavitcher Jew. The 'Hair' episode explains the centrality of markers of cultural identity in representation as well as the performative aspect of 'identity'. Performativity of identities, whether it is racial or gender or ethnic, is a key concept in contemporary investigations of culture to deconstruct essentialist theoretical speculations as well as representations of identity in everyday life, art and politics.

In contemporary critical quarters, two paradigms can be found foundational in conceiving and developing the notion of performativity of identities: a theoretical paradigm developed by exponents of the newly emerged 'Performance Studies' such as Richard Schechner and Peggy Phelan and a linguistic paradigm evolved from J.L Austine's observations on the function of language, later corrected and modified by feminists. J. L. Austine in *How to Do Things With Words* (1975) analysed the way in which speech performs a deed through the act at various moments of utterances. The act of speech is conceived as a
performance which creates an effect and brings something into social and cultural existence.

The exponents of the 'theatrical' paradigm make use of it to signify the performativity in culture with regard to 'performance' as a symbolic form of cultural expressivity. Peggy Phelan argued that performance implicates the real through the presence of living bodies and the living bodies are forever cut off from what they represent. In a Derridean vein, this argument brings into the focus, the primacy of language. The 'Performative' for Phelan "displays language's independence from the referent outside itself" (1993, 148). Erving Goffman's *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) and Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) proved further that the discourses of these two paradigms are porous and permeable. These two works examined ethnographically the ways in which everyday life in various cultures is permeated with performances, taking into account both theatrical and linguistic paradigms of performativity.

Judith Butler brought in the concept of performativity to suggest that subjectivity is constituted through repeated performances within the matrix of some pre-existing regulatory discourses such as gender, race and sexuality. In *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993), Butler approached the problematic of discursive formation of
identities by blending the deterministic vision of Michel Foucault and Louis Althusser with J. L. Austin's speech act theory. While Austin emphasised the singularity of performative speech, Butler focused on the formation of identity through repetitive discursive acts.

According to Judith Butler, identity is an effect of discourse, not the precursor or creator of discourse. The subject is performatively constituted by acts, including acts that signify a particular gender. In the specific context of constitution of subjectivity, 'performativity' is a form of 'citationality', a notion with which Jacques Derrida challenged J. L. Austin's approach to performative utterances. 'Citationality' is a repetition or reiteration of norms. Butler accepts Derrida's emphasis on citationality and its involvement in the process of repeating performances. Hence the gender is performative and the performance of gender is citational. Therefore the performance of gender is not a 'doing' by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed and never precisely repeats the absent original. The performative acts that constitute gender categories are not 'singular' as Austin suggests; it is "ritualized production, a ritual reiteration under and through constraint, under and through the forces of prohibition and taboo, with the threat of ostracism and even death compelling the shape of the production" (Butler, J 1993, 95). The theatrical aspect of performative
finds little room in Butler’s critical scrutiny of performance of gender, because the theatrical aspect of performance suggests some form of pre-existing subject with agency that selects a given performance. Subjects do not choose an identity to perform but are forced into an identity by the regulatory discourses of the society.

Butler’s primary concern is the production of gender categories by discursive regimes. She examines various discourses about gender which assume biological sex as the starting point of gender. The categories of man, woman, heterosexual and homosexual are not essential or inherent characteristics of a subject but they are the effects of specific formulations of power. In her argument, she relies much upon the Foucauldian notion of a modernist concept of ‘sexuality’ created by psychoanalytic, parental and pedagogical practices as well as by sexologist discourse in the nineteenth century which considered sex and gender as in alignment. This discursive regime defined homosexuality and transexuality as inversions.

The production of gender and consequently the prevailing norms of sexual difference are materialised through repetition, reiteration and performance within a specific discourse: “gender proves to be performative… gender is always a doing… . There is no gender identity behind the expression of gender… gender is performatively constituted
by the very expressions which are said to be its results” (Butler 990, 24-25). The performativity of gender demonstrates the complex process of the discursive constitution of subjectivity.

Michel Foucault’s investigations into the life of a nineteenth century hermaphrodite Herculine Barbine (1980) are of importance among contemporary debates on subjection. Herculine was brought up as a girl named Alexina in a convent with other girls. Alexina fell in love with and had sex with a girl Sara. Alexina’s confessions to priests and doctors disclosed the genital anomalies of her body. She was then forced to assume a male identity by changing her gender identity from woman to man, to wear men’s clothes and to adopt a masculine name Herculine. For Foucault, this instance is an imposition of modern gender binary, compulsory heterosexual disciplinary regime (1980, i-xiii).

Foucault described Alexina’s world of bodily pleasures with Sara as a “happy limbo of non-identity” (xiii). This view invited Butler’s criticism because Foucault romanticises Alexina’s state of being as a “world that exceeds the categories of sexual identity” (1990, 94). This state is an impossibility according to Butler because the subject performs an identity even in the guise of another. Butler argues that bodies are materialised as ‘sexed’ through the establishment of norms by
performative repetition. This process of continuous re-citation of norms that reproduce 'sex' is known as performance. Therefore individuals are produced as subjects through a process of gendering.

The discursive formation of gendered bodies shapes their psychic process, such as desires, impulses and instincts. During this process, the norms of heteronormativity are also perpetuated so that the 'boy' or 'girl' achieves social and cultural acceptability by desiring the opposite sex. This heterosexual matrix in which subjectivities are constituted positions homosexuality as the illegitimate other.

In Western societies, racialisation is as important as gendering, because one cannot be an individual without a similarly embodied racial identification. In the case of an individual of mixed race, a concern to trace her/his race will continue throughout life, because the norms of racialisation are repeatedly invoked in almost all realms of life. Several critical investigations have been conducted to deconstruct 'race', especially in the context of the distortion of Black/White binary in racial discourse. Such theoretical practices involve a kind of re-imagining of the boundaries of racial and ethnic identities exactly in the manner Butler and her followers illustrated the subversive potential of 'drag' and 'gender' bending.
In a similar manner, the performative crossover of racial and ethnic identities unsettles the dominant discourses of race by contesting the historical positioning of racial identity. The visible markers such as different categories of colour and physiognomy are the key signifiers of racialised subjectivity. Racial theories are mostly built on the basis of practices of perception. But there are many black people who may pass for whites, but still be constructed as black. For instance, Anna Deavere Smith's tall, light skinned body lacks many visible signifiers of race. Therefore, it is evident that the production and regulation of subjects as essentially Black or White is a practice that emerges from the hegemonic discourse on race.

This idea is investigated in detail by Amina Mama in her Beyond the Masks (1995) by deconstructing the black subject constructed by modern Scientific Psychology. This attempt throws light upon how the discipline of psychology as an academic establishment "has historically constructed the black subject in ways that have stereotyped and derogated black people, and so upheld white supremacist regimes" (Mama 1995, 1). Such investigations identified various discourses responsible for the production of racial identity. Mama illustrates that the reliance of modern psychology on the post enlightenment philosophical assumption of the human subject as a
rational, unitary and fixed entity, is responsible for the narrow and simplified constructions of the ‘Negro’ and the ‘Black’.

The racial and ethnic identities are performative like gender because they are also produced and legitimised by certain discursive regimes. The performativity of racial identity is inexplicably blended with representational practices of hegemonic culture. Subjects are racially positioned by a series of performances of race based on a combination of essentialist norms of the category of race such as skin colour, hair and physiognomy. Contemporary performers, feminists and queer theorists elaborately make use of deconstruction to explore the discourses that perpetuate racial positioning in representation.

Deconstruction of hegemonic practices of representation is a strategy to unsettle the boundaries of racial and ethnic identities. Elizabeth Abel’s analysis of Tony Morrison’s story “Recitatif” is an instance of how all readers identify with various racial positions in representation. Abel scrutinised the responses of Black and White readers of “Recitatif” in order to explicate the web of representational politics of race.

In “Recitatif,” Twyla, an eight year old child narrates the awesome experience in sharing a room with a girl from another race, a girl who does not wash her hair which smells funny, at the beginning of the story. For Abel, Twyla was White and for Lula Fragd, a black
feminist critic, Twyla was certainly black. Most of the readers invited to resolve the Black/White dispute were divided along the racial lines. There is a crucial replacement of the conventional signifiers of racial difference, such as skin colour, by a set of relativistic signifiers such as smell of unwashed hair, in the story. Similarly the racialised body is substituted for a series of disaggregated cultural parts – pink scalloped socks, tight green slacks, large hoop earrings, expertise in playing Jacks etc. Abel finds that the story defines race as a contested terrain “variously mapped from diverse positions in the social landscape” (471).

Ambiguous social cues function as the markers of racial difference in “Recitatif”. Tony Morrison emphasises further the problematic of ‘reading race’ through the character of Maggie, the mute kitchen worker whose racial identity is undecidable due to her sandy skin colour. The critical ambiguity which occurred in reading the race of Twyla and Roberta resonates in finding the race of Maggie. For Twyla she is not ‘raced’ and for Roberta she is Black.

Twyla and Roberta meet at various stages of their life after school. Each time their associations with Black-White racial difference shift and their social, political and cultural circumstances and attitudes interpolate to prevent the reader from reaching a unanimous decision about the races of Twyla and Roberta. Abel suggests that the
“heterogeneous inscriptions of race resist a totalizing reading” (476).
The author herself wrote Abel that her effort in “Recitatif” was to substitute class for racial codes in order to drive a wedge between these typically elided categories” (476). Elizabeth Abel goes on analysing the contemporary debate on racial difference especially in the wake of poststructuralist theorising. She takes into account the critical examinations of Barbara Johnson and Margarete Homans on the significance of exchanges of psychoanalysis and Deconstruction in the related realms of the discursive construction of race.

Abel’s reading of “Recitatif” problematises the politics of representing race. A rigorous move to de-essentialise racialised identity and the subsequent deconstruction of racial positioning in reading a text enable us to see the performativity of race in representation. Anna Deavere Smith invites the spectators to engage critically in the strategic positioning of racial, gender and ethnic identities in her performances.

The performative aspect identities are of paramount significance in Smith’s presentation of characters. The representation of identities in a fluid, unstable and transgressional manner in her performative unravelling of characters drawn from real life challenges the hegemonic practices of representation in culture.
The radical potential of Smith's works in *On the Road: A Search for American Character* lies in her ability to perform identities as trasgressive, crossing and shifting. The cross-racial performances as well as cross-gender performances "can involve more crucially a de-essentialising of identity, a shifting that throws into relief the shapings of identities through historically specific bodily disciplines that we label race, gender and so on" (Kondo 2000, 90). Such performances ostensibly present identities as performative. Smith's performative mimesis, as Elin Diamond suggests, is an effort to move beyond "the phenomenological universals of transcendent subjects and objects" to place identity in a more unstable and contingent relation to identification (Diamond 1992, 397). The spectator apparently engages in this process of locating identities as unstable and shifting in Smith's work both as a character performed on this stage and as spectator subject.

Smith's performative de-essentialising of identities and the consequent dismantling of the discursive regimes that constitute identities are immensely significant in the specific context of mainstream American Theatre, a pioneering domain of patriarchal domination of the White male. Smith in a letter to Dorinne Kondo, one of the dramaturges in her *Twilight: Los Angeles 1992* project, expressed
her disagreement with the representational practices of mainstream American Theatre:

As much as drama is defined as conflict, the American theater failed to take on the challenges of seeing and mirroring race conflict in our society... The theater as a cultural project in this country never really wrestled with the actor's body with all its racialised gestures and intonations, as evidence of racism and a racially divided society. (Kondo, D. 2000, 98)

A radical challenge to the representational politics of mainstream theatre in America is central to Smith’s performative strategy of theatrical mimesis. Simultaneously Smith’s works resist the essentialist identity politics of Black theatre and politics by exploring the subversive potential of representing identities. The constraints of theatrical identification around which the mainstream theatre perpetuates its racialised, gendered and ethnically specific stereotypes are constantly contested by Smith. She invokes repeatedly that the characters she perform are real life characters to evoke alienation effect among spectators in a Brechtian manner to challenge the matrix of identification. This effort is an unsettling of the pre-defined subject positions in the structure of ‘Theatre’.
Smith locates her characters exactly in the matrices of history and power so that her mimesis in documentary format has become a process of making visible the apparently invisible and inconceivable in the quarters of high art and popular culture. As Dorinne Kondo observes, the subversion of hegemonic cultural norms and artistic canon in favour of a radical, counter representative strategy is the hallmark of ‘documentary’ theatre method. (2000, 98).

This dissertation attempts to examine Anna Deavere Smith’s performances as a radical challenge to the representational practices of hegemonic culture with a special reference to contemporary American theatre. Smith’s performative re-imaginings of identities through cross-racial, cross-gender performances locate and define representational practices of identities whether racial, gender, ethnic or religious as a contested terrain. This is effected by an emphatic unsettling of the boundaries and thereby de-essentialsing dominant categories of identity. This effort ultimately results in the deconstruction of the discursive regimes that produce, regulate and legitimise racial, gender, sexual, ethnic and religious identities.

The Second chapter focuses on two major concepts, ‘Performance’ and ‘Post Black’ which have wider currency and significance in contemporary theory and studies of culture. The notion
of ‘performance’ is studied by interrogating the paradigm shift in visual culture and sensibility. ‘Performance’ is defined primarily as an antithesis to conventional theatre and theatrical identification by for it challenges the authority of the dramatic text, process of identification and the positioning of the spectator subject.

Post Black is a recent coinage in the debates on the context of African – American artistic practices as well as politics. Poststructuralist interrogations about the essential Black subjectivity revealed the fact that it is produced by the eurocentric discourses of modernity. The recent theorisations of Cornel West, bell hooks and many other intellectuals inquired the possibilities of ‘postmodern blackness’ by redefining postmodernism in America as a different phenomenon. The notion of ‘Post Black’ is suggested in opposition to ‘Black’ identity politics and artistic movements and to interrogate the production of Black stereotypes in culture by the White dominated institutions. ‘Post Black’ redefines the aesthetic and political context of African Americans.

The Third chapter, “Radicalising Performance and Performing the Radical” is an exploration of Smith’s innovative performance strategy by analysing the major influences on Smith and her contributions to contemporary theatre. Smith found the question political. There is an
extensive study of the formative moments of Smith’s career as a performer and playwright. She revolted basically against Konstantin Stanislavsky’s method of ‘Psychological Realism’ in theatre, which was immensely popular among the practitioners of experimental theatre in America by interrogating the multiplicity of ‘realities’ in formulating human experience and the challenges to the essentialist notion of identity. Smith’s invention of the primacy of ‘language’ in constituting one’s character paved the way for embracing a racial interactive theatrical format, known as ‘documentary theatre’ for her long cherished On the Road: A Search for American Character.

The genesis and development of ‘Documentary Theatre’ are discussed in detail with specific references to the contemporary practitioners of this technique. Documentary theatre format is an intuitive performance strategy in the hands of performers and activists dealing with communities. This theatrical practice challenges the canonical superiority of dramatic texts by presenting everyday communicative acts as theatrical and aesthetic performances. The major exponents of this performance technique such as Emily Mann, Moise Kaufman, ‘Culture Clash’(a performance group), Marc Wolf and, of course, Anna Deavere Smith embarked on politicising art and
aesthetisising politics as far as their interactive theatrical endeavour in communities seeking self reflexive action is concerned.

The next three chapters, "Fires in the Mirror: Problematising ‘Other’ Identities”, “The Twilight Zone: Identity Transgressions” and “In the Panopticon: Intermeshings of Power, Media and Sexuality in House Arrest” examine the three latest and most acclaimed performances of Anna Deavere Smith. “Fires in the Mirror: Problematising ‘Other’ Identities” is an analysis of Smith’s performance text, *Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights Brooklyn and Other Identities* which centres around the mass scale race riots which erupted in Crown Heights, Brooklyn between Black and Jews following the death of a black boy Gavin Cato and the murder of a Jewish scholar from Australia, Yankel Rosenbaum. *Fires* was Smith’s debut at the Shakespeare Festival of New York public theatre in 1992.

Smith’s attempt was not to document the racial conflict or represent characters who belong to both sides of the riots. She interrogated the manifold crises springing out of the dark realms of the existing spectacle of racial conflict. Her rigorous performative explorations in the Crown Heights community brought out the multiplicity of voices enshrouded in the Black-White conflict. After hundreds of interviews conducted in and around Crown Heights and
New York, Smith performed twenty-nine characters without any regard to a final resolution, justice or truth.

"Twilight Zone: Identity Transgressions" focuses on Smith's project of representing characters in a racially and ethnically complex terrain of social conflict. The shifting boundaries, transgression borders and cross over in race, gender, ethnicity and class made Twilight: Los Angeles 1992 a complex and challenging work. Twilight: Los Angeles 1992 was the creative result of Smith’s commission by a pioneering theatre forum in Los Angeles, Mark Taper, to produce a performance in the documentary format about the Los Angeles riots in 1992. The Twilight project as a whole, pivoted around the first multicultural riots in American history that froze the city for more than a year. Smith’s special intention in the project was to explore the inadequacy of dialogue on race related issues. Smith searched for a language to interrogate the complex state of race relations in Los Angeles city through the project. The multi-racial, multi-ethnic cityscape of Los Angeles foregrounded the problem of blurring borders of identity, especially in the wake of engulfing capitalism and mediatisation. Gordon Davidson, Director of Mark Taper Forum, provided four dramaturges from different racial and ethnic background to tackle the complexity of race relations. The bipolar foundations of present-day
debate on race are interrogated and the whole scenario of the riots which followed the verdict in the Rodney King beating case is re-examined through this performance project.

The last of the three chapters discussing the most rigorous and popular phase of Anna Deavere Smith’s performance project, “In the Panopticon: Intemeshings of power, Media and Sexuality in House Arrest” examines the ‘American character’ as located in the matrices of power and history. Smith shifted her emphasis from the inward conflicts of a particular community to an investigation into the ethical and political challenges in the formative process of subjectivity. The discourse of presidency is brought to the sharp focus of the work to problematise the history of the United States of America. Smith’s theatrical endeavour encompassing the representation of a wide range of characters including presidents, historians, philosophers, White House staffers and journalists seems to embrace a new performance strategy with multimedia settings and high-tech histrionic devices in House Arrest. This chapter focuses on Smith’s redefinition of the political subjectivity with a special emphasis on the labyrinth of present day discourse of communication that makes and unmakes subjects.

A close reading of Smith’s On the Road Project will unobtrusively explicate the radical potential of her work in performing
identities subversively, as constituted in the matrix of hegemonic, regulatory discourses of power, sexuality and race. This dissertation attempts to explore Smith's subversive performance strategy which contests the dominant practices of representation in mainstream culture, media and politics through a performative redefinition of identities as formulated discursively.