Chapter Three

**Radicalising Performance and Performing the Radical**

The performance practices of Anna Deavere Smith foreground the primacy of listening to other’s voices in theatre. This performative strategy consists of listening to various voices of a community, responding to those voices theatrically and engaging the issues triggering towards social action. Theatre for Smith is the launching pad of social action where the voices of the unheard and the marginalized are to be articulated.

"Theatre is action, but in the beginning was the word. And the word was all. And speech is the action. . . . [T]he way action happens in theatre is through the propulsion of words," remarked Anna Deavere Smith affirming fully her conviction that words are crucial in exploring realities of persons, places and situations (Lewis, B. 1993, 58). Smith reminisces in her introduction to *Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights Brooklyn and Other Identities* three instances when she deeply experienced the power of the word. While reading the preface to a book of Native American Poems, a sentence — "The word, the word above all, is truly magical, not only by its meaning, but by its artful
manipulation.”—struck her. Once her father corrected her grandfather’s saying “If you say a word often enough, it becomes your own” to “If you say a word often enough, it becomes you.” Her Shakespeare teacher insisted on considering dialogue in Shakespeare as thought and asked her to repeat any fourteen lines from his plays again and again until they struck an inner chord. Later Smith learnt that it is the rigour of language “which was bound to evoke powerful images” (Smith 1993, xxiii-xxv). This conviction about the power of language is central to Smith’s performance strategy.

Smith, now fifty-three, has won international acclaim for her prismatic performance pieces, especially with her more recent works, *Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights Brooklyn and Other Identities* produced in 1992, *Twilight: Los Angeles 1992* in 1993 and *House Arrest* in 1996. Born in Baltimore, Anna was the oldest of the five children of Deavere Smith and Anna Smith. The Smiths, who belonged to the middle class, lived in a segregated neighbourhood. During her life in the Western High School, Baltimore, she was exposed for the first time to the presence of people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Smith studied linguistics in Beaver College, Glenside, Pennsylvania for graduation in 1967.
Smith defined the context that enforced her to roam all over the United States in these words: “anti-war movement, assassination of Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy, the beginning of environmental movement, and the bra-burning; brief it was of the women’s movement” (2000, 3). The anti-establishment movements together promised a sense of social space to the American youth in those intellectually turbulent moments. In 1971, Smith moved to San Francisco and joined an acting class in American Conservatory Theatre. After taking an MFA from the American Conservatory Theatre, Smith moved to New York and did small roles in theatre and worked as a customer service representative in KLM airlines.

This low level secretarial job at KLM gave her a big break as far as her On the Road: A Search for American Character project is concerned, because the idea of the search for character began when she was listening to the complaints of many people in the airline office. As she puts it, “I . . . listened, listened, listened to a wide variety of vocal tones that spanned from Holland to the Caribbean, Brooklyn and onward . . .” This experience enabled her to think of the relationship of character to language and more specifically the “relationship of language to identity” (Smith 2000, 49). Smith accepted a position in 1978 at Carnegie Mellon University as teacher of drama and
simultaneously she was contemplating a theatrical project, which revealed the relationship of character to language and language to identity.

To explore further, Smith wanted people to talk to her authentically without the burden of truth and lies and inhibitions in such a way that their beings pour out through their speech. In order to emphasise the seminal role of the authentic voice in developing a project dealing with the relationship of language and identity, Smith cites her meeting with Kristine Linklater, author of The Thinking Voice. While Smith was a fellow at Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Smith met Linklater, a pre-eminent teacher of voice for American actors in front of a television set showing Clarence Thomas testimony:

We watched the testimony; she was of course, appalled by the entire display. Her ears were attuned to lies and truths. We were both screaming at the television, using all we had gathered over the years about authentic voice, true seeming feelings and grounded speaking . . . We were both appalled at the complete and total lack of authenticity. (Smith 2000, 15)

This quest unfolded gradually a kind of dissatisfaction with the acting tradition of psychological realism in which Smith was trained.
This method which was immensely influential in the first half of the last century in America served as a pioneering experimental theatre especially when the Methodist Theatre popularised it. Smith's vision of 'theatre' developed in exact opposition to the psychologically realistic conventions in theatre. Her myriad experiences in mass media, especially television, opened up for her new horizons of theatrical innovation. Smith became more and more exposed to the vulnerability of existing modes of theatre in its confrontation with solid social issues.

**Beyond Mimesis: A Critique of Psychological Realism**

Psychological realism in theatre was based on the assumption that characters live inside the actor/actress. In order to make the stage behaviour look real, the actors were trained to create a character through a process of realising his/her similarity with character. The thrust of western theatre, for the most part, has been on the unfolding of character.

Konstantin Stanislavsky (1863-1938), the founder of the acting 'system' and the co-founder of Moscow Art Theatre, was the foremost practitioner of the technique of psychological realism in theatre. Through a variety of experiments focusing on bringing the actors own past emotions in playing a role, Stanislavsky formulated a method for
actors. This method of physical action concentrated on intense inner identification with the character.

The character’s confrontation with various situations in his life is often analogous to the actors’ real life experiences, according to Stanislavsky. He defines a secondary text apart from the dramatic text in which the character and the play become realities. This knowledge other than the dramatic text and the information about the characters are crucial in his method because the actors’ identification with the character is accomplished fully at this level.

By defining character as a creation of the self or the character as manifested in terms of the self of the actor, Stanislavsky’s theory has defined a culminating point in western theatrical tradition. The actors’ identification with the character, which is the predominant and decisive aspect of western theatrical conventions, is maximised to the extent that the self and the other (the characters) fuse together through the experience of the actor. Stanislavsky’s method centres on creating the characters from the experiences of the actor. Here, character exists only in relation to the actor.

In Creating a Role (1961), Stanislavsky described various stages of creating a character. In each stage, the actor is advised to perform exercises to identify fully to the emotional and psychological state of the
character. The emphasis is given on the physical and emotional states of the actor and the actors' identification with the character. In Stanislavsky's 'The Period of Emotional Experience' (3-106), the actor identifies fully with the objectives or emotional aims of the character in the play by a thorough study of the dramatic text. Through an analysis of the plot, major themes and relationships of the characters to each other, the actor comprehends the desires of the character. In the next stage, 'The Period of Physical Embodiment' (85-106) the actor commences to procure the physical behaviour and attributes of the character.

Smith fundamentally disagreed with Stanislavsky on many of these aspects, given her understanding of contemporary problems of representation. She found this method intensely self oriented: "I don’t think I should base my idea of another person all on my own feelings, which is what Stanislavsky was after" (2000, 53). Smith wanted to learn more about others not about herself. The self-based technique in theatre begins with the other and reaches oneself, "a technique that would empower the other to find the actor rather than the other way around" (Smith, 1993, xxvii). She found the speech pattern or rhythm of speech as capable of manifesting one’s individuality.
Smith’s fundamental disagreement with Stanislavsky’s dramaturgy is that it centres on the actor and the actor’s understanding of the character. The undercurrent of naturalism in portraying a character extremely ‘real’ brings in the notion of identity as fixed and static. Moreover, exploring another persona through one’s own self may not enrich our understanding of others. Smith challenges Stanislavsky’s method on the grounds of its incapacity to perform one’s reality on the stage in an entirely different theoretical and cultural context. In order to combat the psychologically realistic notion of identity and its relationship to character, Smith focuses on identity as a process: “I believe identity is a process and that we are every moment making an adjustment ...” (2000, 52). The notion of identity as dynamic and protean is brought forth herein to develop a performance alternative to the rigidly self-oriented theatrical techniques reinforced by Stanislavsky and subsequent practitioners. The genesis of Smith’s innovations regarding identity – identity is always in a state of flux and forever in motion – is her intense socio-political concerns and cultural investigations.

**The Guises of Proteus**

For Smith, the self-centred technique is helpful in exploring the actor, not the other. Bringing the aspect of the ‘social’ is a process by which the actor devotes fully his ears, mind and emotion to the other in order to portray identity which is in motion.
At the time the idea of the *On the Road* project emanated in Smith's mind, there was an explosion of celebrity interviews in mass media and popular culture. The television talk shows had become immensely popular because they brought in real life drama to the media. Smith watched closely the interviews and transcribed television talk shows to find moments when the interviewee struggled to get rid of his identity formed through the perception of the interviewer. She instructed her students to re-enact from the transcribed texts. "I was using the interviews as a structure for the student to become the other," stated Smith (1993, xxix).

Eventually, Smith's project confirmed the total failure of conventional theatre by reinstating the fact that the actors' identification with the character through actions, language or movements cannot bring in the characters to the stage. Smith takes into account only one aspect of the individual without any regard to represent the characters completely on stage: the language.

While teaching at the Carnegie-Mellon University, Smith confronted with another situation when she directed Adrianne Kennedy's play *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White*. The protagonist in the play often brings in movie stars to narrate things and Smith's acting students felt uncomfortable in enacting real life
characters on the stage. Smith concentrated on enacting movie stars and celebrities with an insight provided by her mother that the movie stars of forties and fifties had distinct vocal styles. As a part of her experimentation with vocal rhythms and styles, Smith found out that speech patterns and rhythms emphatically reveal the actuality of a person.

Her observations of identity, manifest in language are further clarified by her experience with the Tonight Show, a television talk show presented by Johnny Carson in 1979. In one of the episodes, Sophia Loren was invited as the chief guest. Sophia Loren disrupted the whole show by refusing to participate in the rhythm of the show. She kept quiet and in control in the loud show defying the expectations of the show. This instance provided Smith with the innovation that one's presence as well as identity is revealed through one's vocal rhythms when he establishes those as a norm for interaction. Sophia Loren's presence had become critical because she subverted the interviewer's fast-paced vocal rhythms through her low-key speech pattern and frequent silences.

In celebrity interviews as well as in talk shows, Smith discerned a battle between the interests of the interviewer and his subject: between what the interviewer wanted to uncover and what the subject was
willing to show. Such experiences convinced Smith of developing an ‘ear’ which is quintessential in developing a voice to represent characters. Smith’s investigation with this keen ‘ear’, which began as a inquiry into the relationship between language and identity, gained new dimensions when she encountered moments when the speakers “syntax starts to fall apart, their grammar starts to fumble, they lose words . . .” (Smith 2000, 51). Hence Smith believed that these are the moments when we make adjustments with identity. More specifically, these are the moments when identity begins to be negotiated.

In order to energise people to reach such moments during their speech, Smith made use of three questions devised by a linguist whose name she couldn’t remember (2000, 50) when the On the Road Project was taking shape (2000, 50). The questions were (1) Have you ever come close to death? (2) Have you ever been accused of something that you did not do? (3) Do you remember the circumstances of your birth? (1993, xxxix). Later she abandoned these questions when she was convinced that they had taught her enough to listen.

During the interview process, Smith talked as little as possible in order to give her subject complete space to reveal his/her character. During the interviews, once she memorised the words and mastered the cadence and rhythm of speech, Smith concentrates on the physical
appearance and mannerisms of her subjects. Combining her technique of interviewing people and the process of re-enacting the characters with the help of recorded interviews, Smith began her magnificent project *On the Road a Search for American Character*.

**The Documentary Concept in Theatre: Mapping Oral History**

Smith’s performative technique of enacting a character can be seen as an antithesis to the process of representing characters on the stage in Western theatre conventions. Richard Schechner described Smith’s process as ‘incorporation’: “Smith works by means of deep mimesis, a process opposite to that of ‘pretend.’ To ‘incorporate’ means to be possessed by, to open oneself up through and deeply to another being” (1999, 265-66). Smith’s strategy is a sort of ‘deep mimesis’ or ‘hypernaturalistic mimesis’ (Martin 1999, 267) by which she replicates the words as well as other microscopic details of each persona she performs.

This particular style of solo performance practice is variously described as “documentary theatre” (Kondo 2000, 81), “documentary solo performance” (Kalb 2001, 13), “Community theatre” (Corso 1994, 1), “performing oral history” (Fuller et.al. 1995, 126) and “post modern theatre for development” (Richards, S.L. 1993, 46). The diversity of
critical responses to Smith's theatrical practice is an index of the radical openness of her performative style.

The performance techniques popular among the practitioners of this kind of theatre are to interview the subjects and script the interview material into monologues and stage the interviews in an edited, one-person format. The subjects to be interviewed are selected on the basis of their relationship to the central event around which the performance develops. Witnesses, victims, experts, friends, acquaintances, social scientists, community activists, artists, politicians and assailants constitute the category of interviewees.

One of the major inspirations behind this technique is the conviction that everyday communicative acts are often dramatic pieces for presentation when it is placed in a different discourse such as theatre. The actual function of the documentary performer is to copy and translate the speech of her/his subjects into this new context.

It is evident that the documentary performance art draws its crucial performance strategy from mass media, specifically television. Television interviews, on-the-spot reporting, talk shows and documentaries contribute much to the evolution of this new theatrical genre. In documentary theatre, as in mass media, the presence of the actual or a direct reference to the actual is the kernel of the performance
practice. The raw materials other than interviews are taken from a variety of sources including historical documents, news clips, performances, speeches, and films.

The root word of document originated from the Latin *docere* meaning to teach. In English, documentary means “a lesson: an admonition, a warning” according Oxford English Dictionary. As an artistic form, documentary style and technique originated in motion pictures. Jack C. Ellis, author of *The Documentary Idea* (1989, 1-2), defines the notion of documentary in terms of subjects, purpose or points of view, forms, production methods and its effect upon the audience.

The subject of documentary is specific and factual concerning public matters, people, events and places. The makers of documentary record social, cultural or political phenomena with an eye on informing the spectators. The documentary form is functional and loose and sometimes fragmentary. There is no “conventional dramaturgical progression from exposition to complication to discovery to denouement” (Ellis.1989, 3). This aspect of documentary is evident in Smith’s non-linear and fragmentary presentations.

One of the fundamentals of ‘documentary’ is the use of non-actors. It makes use of real people and real locations without settings or
light effects. Its effect upon the audience is mainly oriented towards leading them to some sort of action.

The genesis of this speculative theatre method can be traced back chronologically to the Living Newspapers of the Federal Theatre Project. The productions in this series encompassed issues such as housing, health care and labour unions with dramatic scenes, light and sound effects, images and multi-level sets. The Theatre of Fact in Germany in the fifties which dealt with issues of public interest such as Holocaust, Vietnam and the atomic bomb also made use of similar techniques. The documentary format was experimented efficaciously by Peter Cheeseman in England in the sixties by providing a variety of voices and battling views drawn from real sources. A single actor performed all the roles by character crossings with small costume changes. In the sixties and seventies in America, theatre was overwhelmed by social issues. Theatre groups like the San Francisco Mime Troupe and Bread and Puppet Theatre worked on civil rights, political morality, Vietnam and other major issues of the time. But the documentary format is found to be less pronounced in these works.

The emergence of solo performances making use of documentary theatre format is partly due to the decline of modern theatres in the west and its failure to intervene in socio-political life. The decline of western
concept of ‘theatre’ is twined with the evolution of late capitalist political atmosphere, where the notion of community is subjected to total distortion and deformation. Simultaneously, there is a transfiguration of the spectator subject due to the emergence of post modern culture industry which converts practices of representation into spectacles. While describing Smith’s theatre as ‘postmodern theatre of development’, S.L. Richards aptly referred to the theatres of development in the third world communities which are economically undeveloped. (Richards, S.L 93, 46) Theatres of development are generally formulated by government agencies and funding organisations with a view to introducing modern technologies regarding agriculture, health, and nutrition to rural and undeveloped communities. The concept of the postmodern theatre for development indicates the kind of theatre valid for elite western societies which are socially under-developed.

Documentary solo performance came into prominence as a socio cultural and political alternative in societies which are robbed of community theatrical activity in public sphere. In his illuminating essay on documentary solo performance, Jonathan Kalb emphasised this fact by describing solo performance art with a documentary base as a product of ‘field research’ and as provocative enough to unleash a debate on “public’s receptivity to politics and critical thinking”(2002,
14). Such performances, undoubtedly simple, least expensive and convenient, most penetratingly brought in a paradigm for interactive theatrical practices within communities.

For Kalb, the past quarter century was a conspicuously dismal period for political theatre in America. At the same time, “many of the country’s most politically vital groups voluntarily ghettoised their creative and political energies by playing only to select communities defined by ethnicity, party, gender or geography”(14-15). Hence the evolution of documentary solo performance art signals a substantial diversion from the popular theatrical activities and a disagreement with mainstream theatres’ handling of social issues.

Emily Mann, artistic director of McCarther theatre, brought home an idea of theatre close to documentary theatre through her Theatre of Testimony. Mann’s scripts developed from oral history, interviews and other documentary pieces and were performed in the form of direct address. This theatrical method is evident in her recent works such as Greensboro: A Requiem, a play about the murder of anti-Klu-Klux-Klan activists and Having Our Say, a historical approach to the black life in U.S.

The Laramie Project produced by the New York Tectonic Theatre Project directed by Moise Kaufman remains as one of the prominent
theatre projects produced in a documentary format. This performance is based on the brutal killing of Mathew Shepard, a gay, in 1998 in Laramie, Wyoming. Tectonic theatre crew went to Laramie and collected responses from people through two hundred interviews. The resultant performance piece portrayed Laramie people responding to a variety of issues including the murder of Mathew Shepard. The journalistic approach framed through facts with an intensified theatrical sense heightened the performance effect.

The Chicano – Latino trio’s Culture Clash constituted on May 5, 1984 became popular for its skit based satire on Chicano issues. The Culture Clash embraced documentary style inspite of the skit series in their latest works: *Radio Mambo*, *Culture Clash is Border Town*, *Nuyorican Stories: Culture Clash in the City* based on New York City and a performance based on San Francisco city. They were commissioned by Regional Theatre for these projects and the interview process of Culture Clash is described as excavatory and peeling back the layers of local history. They were also commissioned by regional theatres such as Miami Light Project, San Diego Repertory Theatre and Brava.

Marc Wolf, a New York based performer, made use of documentary theatre practice by acknowledging his indebtedness to the
performative method of Anna Deavere Smith in 1999. The Kernel issue was the gay relationship in U.S Army out-breacking its silence on such issues. *Another American: Asking and Telling*, a performance based on Wolf’s interviews with various people related to this issue premiered at the theatre at St. Clement’s, New York. Wolf spent three years collecting documentary material and conducting interviews with people of both military and non-military background. Marc Wolf began his enquiry on the fact that ‘Tommys’ and gays are often subjected to stereotyping. Wolf’s each piece, gathered from his vignettes, comments critically on the other, thereby producing a sequential order.

Danny Hoch’s remarkable performance pieces *Some People* (1993) and *Jails, Hospitals and Hip-Hop* (1998) directed by Jo Bonney encompass multiple voices from New York arranged with conspicuous brevity and apparent familiarity. He does not claim to be a documentor, but a performer blending inner voices with voices from his neighbourhood. Fantasy is triggered as a dominant theme, emphasising a myth of reality.

**The Twilight of Proscenium Theatre**

The context of emergence of documentary solo performances can further be defined by the emerging techno-culture and mass media and their impact upon contemporary societies. In a mediatised society, mass
mediational systems moment by moment constitute and reconstitute viewers. The complex economy of information/entertainment in these circumstances problematises the fact-fiction dichotomy as well as the authenticity/inauthenticity of facts. In this context, documentary theatre format with its radical energies brings forth the notion of a theatre that intervenes insistently in societies.

The adaptation of the word 'documentary' to signify a specific theatrical activity is extremely significant in the background of documentary film and television. There is a very powerful tradition of film, television and drama in which the module of the personal reigns supreme in contrast with the tradition of film and television which affirms its function as rigorously motivating and informing people known as documentary. The documentary tradition anchors a historical paradigm which perpetuates the relevant and contemporary in mass media. The two major streams in contemporary solo performance art have undeniable affinities with the above mentioned traditions in film and television. The performances of Spalding Gray, Whoopi Goldberg, Eric Bogosian and Liza Kron can be seen as an epitome of personalized performance practices inspired partly by a perplexed desire for self actualisation and partly by the present day postmodern preference for micro narratives. The other division of solo performance art described
as ‘documentary,’ represented by Anna Deavere Smith, Marc Wolf and Danny Hoch, turns their performances into a political tool, diverting from the idea of mirroring their selves through the performing bodies. This effect is achieved by providing the spectators with opportunities to identify with others through a transformed single individual and thus bringing the “power of the mirror to the representation of otherness” (Kalb2002, 23).

The basic method of documentary film and television is to enquire issues, events, places or people through personal interviews, group discussions, historical documents, evidences, narratives and visuals. Then with profound editorial skill, the recorded material is arranged to match the purpose of the documentary. When the documentary technique is adapted to performance, the editorial labour is not to fix the recorded material to a certain frame already formulated or planned but to broaden the scope of the work by unrestricting the frame into multiple viewpoints to the search of a greater goal like Smith’s search for ‘American Character.’ The interview material is edited purposefully to bring in multiple dimensions of the central issue by presenting contradictory, opposing and battling voices altogether to create a panoramic theatrical as well as social experience. In a definition, reminiscent of Bertolt Brecht’s invocation of Marx’s XI
Thesis on Feuerbach, Kalb distinguished documentary performance on the basis of its potential to "change the audience’s perceptions of its own world" (Kalb 2002, 21). The extreme social, political and cultural concerns of the exponents of documentary performances emphasise a social purpose.

The general notion of documentary performance includes a community’s effort to look at and into itself. Hence critics unabashedly associated the metaphor of ‘mirror’ in analysing such performances. The extensive use of the ‘mirror’ metaphor in the case of the performances of Anna Deavere Smith is accomplished with a wide variety of emphasis. It ranges from Barbara Johnson’s observation, “Fires in the Mirror holds a mirror up to America” (Modelsky, 58) to Jonathan Kalb’s "Turning the mirror into a political tool” (2002, 23). The performer’s body aptly represented by the metaphor of mirror presents characters from the community and consequently reflects the community.

**On the Road: A Search for the Social**

The genesis and basic purpose of Smith’s magnificent performance project in documentary format, *On the Road: A Search for American Character* lie in her effort to intervene, interact and reflect the communities in a moment of crisis. This series addresses the desire of
various communities to look into their own crisis, fractures and fears in a disturbing as well as entertaining manner. *On the Road*, the one woman performance series that Smith has been investigating, gathering, editing and performing since 1982, posits a radical challenge to the audience community to continuously relocate their ideological and critical positions. Smith reminisces: "When I started this project in the early 1980s, my simple introduction to any one I interviewed was 'if you give me an hour of your time, I’ll invite you to see yourself performed'" (1993, xiii). Through Smith's research and performance, the communities perceived its own frailties and obsessions with a sharp focus on the mimicking and mirroring aspects of the work.

Using the three questions devised by a linguist, Smith went to the streets to explore further the intricacies of human character revealed through the speech patterns of individuals. Smith's hypothesis on spoken word and its relationship to character found best manifestations when she had observed that the controlled and structured social identity revealed at the beginning of the interview process was subjected to a total subversion at certain moments. Such moments of subversive speech patterns emerge due to a special kind of energisation in speech. It results in an unsophisticated, rigorous and performable expressions of the interviewee rejecting the formalities of language.
After prolonged investigations, Smith found out that the individual uses language as a strategy in his participation in a community. Smith searched for moments when the character expresses something at the cost of failure of language. For Smith it is a moment when one person "departs from English language in a perfect state to create something that is individual." (1993, xxx). The three questions suggested by the linguist awakened the individual, the interviewee, rapidly to an energised state of being. This experimentation functioned as foundational to Smith’s future performance practices.

Smith elucidates further this point using the instance of her interview with Bill Clinton for House Arrest in her illuminating book Talk to Me: Listening Between the Lines (2000, 248). The interview with Clinton took place in the Oval Office in the White House. During the interview, Clinton with his usual enthusiasm uttered "Little bitty notice made" referring to the allegation that a Republican law firm spent four million dollars to find out the source of Hillary Clinton’s legal bills for the White Water controversy. Smith remarks: “When people start talking like that, I normally say in an interview. Now you are talking. By now you’re talking – I mean, now you are past language as information. I don’t need information, I only need you to come out of the confines of presentable sentence structure, to burst right out of grammar to show me
who you are” (248). For Smith, such moments throw light upon one’s bare self liberated from the shackles of cultural conventions.

Smith often quoted dramatist Harold Pinter’s statement that language is a strategy to cover nakedness. Sandra. L. Richards described Smith’s obsession with the instances when language breaks down as crucial in capturing the characters in its originality to performance: “Language breaks down into vocal utterances, lapses in syntax, markedly altered rhythms, or repetitions that betray the individuals’ great investment in what is being said” (Richards, 41).

In the beginning of On the Road series, Smith performed in small communities, conference halls, lecture halls, rehearsal spaces, and classrooms elaborating issues within the community. These locations, generally non-theatrical spaces, hint at Smith’s commitment to social action through theatrical devices.

Moreover, these performances came out as a result of commissions by communities or institutions interested in self reflexive investigations of issues emanating within them. Usually Smith begins with a list of names and telephone numbers and then proceeds to links gathered from her subjects. She taped the interviews and edited them with great precision and presented before an audience including the interviewees.
On the Road: New York City produced for 'A Clear Space' 

Theatre, New York in 1982, is the first among twenty one performances in the series so far. It is followed by A Birthday Party and Aunt Julia's Shoes for Ward Nasse Gallery, New York in 1983 and Charlayne Hunter Gault in 1984. In her work Smith made use of some props and sets and a variety of telephones to suggest different characters in different locations. Smith performed with jackets, spectacles, hair styles, coffee mugs and sandwiches to distinguish characters. Smith often shocks, delights, elevates and saddens the viewers by presenting words in rapid succession. All these effects are achieved by enforcing the community to look into itself and its relationship to events or people or places. S.L. Richards's description of one of Smith's works in On the Road series titled Gender Bending: On the Road Princeton University is illuminating in this regard:

Barefoot, got dressed in a scooped-neck 1950s purple taffeta dress with black tights and stiff crinoline slips visible underneath, Anna Deavere Smith strides down through the audience on to the stage of a Princeton lecture hall. Donning some fake pearls and picking up one of the many phones scattered about, she then launches into a fifty minute monologue in which she performs some twenty-five
men and women, many of whom are now sitting in her audience. (1993, 35)

Smith was commissioned for this performance by the Princeton University and the work Gender Bending was performed in front of an audience associated with the University. Some of the major issues cited in the interviews conducted for the performance are colour consciousness among black students, sex-role strain and male eating clubs in the University. Smith's subjects included administrators, professors, students, residents and other employees. The views, opinion, observations and commentaries properly edited and arranged, become "representations seasoned with a critical consciousness" to provide the community with a complex and analytic illustration of its socio-cultural tensions and anxieties (Martin 1996, 84). Smith in On the Road: Princeton University provided the community of "Students, faculty, and staff a comic, provocative image of itself as it struggles to negotiate differences of gender, race and class" (Richards, S.L1993, 35). The major sources of such tension in contemporary communities are gender, race and class.

Similarly, Smith's work in 1988 for 'Bay Area Women in Theatre' symposium organised by Phoenix Theatre, San Francisco, titled Voices of Bay Area Women has drawn its substance from people
working in theatre. Smith’s exploration of issues related to race and gender for University of Pennsylvania in *Gender Bending: On the Road to University of Pennsylvania, On Black Identity and Black Theatre* for Cross Roads Theatre Company, New Brunswick and *Fragments* performed in the conference on intercultural performance in Bellagio, Italy are other instances from *On the Road: A Search for American Character*.

*Gender Bending: Princeton University* brought in issues such as how women were imported from Seven Sisters Colleges to Princeton campus to entertain men in the weekends, Sally Frank’s version of the harassment she suffered when she sought admission to all male eating clubs and low paid black employees. In *From the Outside Looking In* performed for Eureka Theatre, San Francisco, Smith focused on the ethnic diversity of the Bay Area as the cause of its cultural and artistic renown. Her disturbing narratives on drugs being used by the state to criminalize the entire black community and on the discrimination of AIDS patients also had sprung the same notion.

Smith’s representation of vocal rhythms and speech patterns delighted the audience because the characters represented are familiar to them in their community life. The abrupt laughter and applause during the performances show the community’s intimacy with the characters
and the way it looks into its own mirrored self. The enactment of characters brings in laughter when some aspects of a character are emphasised which are otherwise not remarkable. The vibrant doubling provokes shock too as it originates from the presentation of characters twined with the core issues in the community. Hence Eugenio Barba described Smith's performative technique of potential doubling of characters as "political clowning".

The series, On the Road: A Search for American Character engages in creating a transformation within the community by evoking delightful as well as shocking moments. Through the performances, the community experiences a self-reflexive approach to its own moments of crisis and conflict. S.L. Richards describes Smith's performances as "potentially therapeutic" (1993, 43). Gradually Smith's performance process develops into a rigorous mechanism of self-critique for the community which commissioned her.

In all the works mentioned above, Smith interacts with and intervenes at a volatile moment in a community, which is beyond its self-designed mechanisms of comprehension. It is evident from researches on communities that communities automatically develop their own strategies to resolve emerging crises within it. But in the postmodern, multicultural and multiracial communities, such strategies
do not originate organically. Smith’s commissions are generally meant to instigate a community to look self-reflexively into its own shortcomings, crises or perils. Smith’s role constitutes a catalytic effect upon communities seeking therapeutic theatrical experiments to resolve their inner crises.

The specific situations in communities into which Smith is commissioned to perform remind us of the anthropologist and theatre scholar Victor Turner’s definition of ‘social drama.’ According to Turner, social dramas are “units of a harmonic or disharmonic process arising in a conflict situation” with four major phases of public action: Breach, Crisis, Redressive action and Reintegration. (Turner 1974, 37) For Turner, when a community or a group, at a certain stage of its development or movement to a new social order is subjected to a blockade or barrier, the community or group struggles to readjust with itself. Turner emphasises that this readjustment takes place performatively by means of a theatrical activity.

Erving Goffman also shares a similar view regarding the performative nature of redressive processes in human communities. Goffman believes in the theatrical nature of all social interactions because individuals prepare their social roles and perform them to constitute social interactions and routines.
Smith’s commissioned performative interventions occur when a group is in crisis and her interviews and enactment of characters from the group functions as a redressive mechanism. In this manner, this interactive performance practice within the community is an effort to reintegrate the disturbed sides into the main body of the group or in a social recognition of the crisis.

Conflict and conflict resolution, the kernel of Turner’s definition of social drama, are accomplished in her works through a deeper awareness and comprehension of the multiple dimensions of the crisis in the community.

Richard Schechner observes three kinds of transformations in the enactment of social dramas. The drama or the story or the design, the performer and the audience are the three elements subjected to ‘transformation’ at various levels of the performance process. (1977, 170). The changes in the performer take place due to temporary rearrangements of the body with costumes, make up and due to a psychological movement which Schechner describes as transportation. In the audience, changes may be either temporary or permanent depending upon whether the performance is entertainment (temporary) or ritual (permanent). The sole purpose of Smith’s commission is to effect such transformations within the community. As Schechner
suggests, in aesthetic dramas (dramas with the purpose of pleasure, entertainment and aesthetic fulfilment) the audience is separated in actuality and in concept from the performer/performers. But in social drama everybody performs and transformation takes place at all levels. Schechner notes a point of convergence of these two streams where the performers are spectators too (171). Smith’s works can be located at this particular level where the impulses of social and aesthetic dramas converge.

The undercurrent of a “social drama” shapes and organises Smith’s performances in the community. With the use of costumes, wigs, masks, physical exercises, video projections and pieces of furniture, the performer evinces a kind of make-believe in the audience to create a sense of another person in another time and space. Spectators at the same time experience change in mood or consciousness or in both which are temporary or permanent. “In some kinds of performances – rites of passage, for example – a permanent change in the status of the participants is accomplished. But all these changes are in the service of social homeostasis. Changes affecting individuals or groups help maintain a balance of the whole system” (Schechner 1977, 171). In the later works the aspects of aesthetic drama are intensified and the social
dramatic effect seems fractured by transporting the performances to various locations outside the community.

From Community to Theatre and Mass Media

In the early nineties, Smith’s project gained abrupt public acclaim with her commission for the New York Public Theatre’s ‘Festival of New Voices’ directed by George Wolfe. In the earlier works in On the Road series, Smith conducted her interview-based investigations within the communities and performed specifically for the community. Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights Brooklyn and Other Identities is the first work she performed outside the locale of her investigations. Being a smashing commercial success, the performance was premiered in the New York Public Theatre and was later shifted to a larger theatre named Anspacher. In 1993, a television version of the performance was broadcast by the PBS American Play House. These performances marked a radical departure from Smith’s earlier works in the series.

Twilight: Los Angeles 1992 is Smith’s elegant performance piece based on the epidemic of riots in Los Angeles followed the verdict of the Rodney King beating case. After a nine-month long interview process, Smith presented characters belonging to various races, classes and locations in a distilled form in the Mark Taper forum, Los Angeles. The performance, a stunning documentary, portrays the first multi-
cultural riot in America. The array of voices ranging from victims of violence, gang members, cops, looters, Korean merchants and public figures made the show compelling and extravagant. This performance does not attempt to address the origins of racial unrest in Los Angeles. Smith’s effort in *Twilight* is to catch the essence of the ethnically diverse and divided city of Los Angeles.

*House Arrest* is an ambiguous work that relocates the praxis of power and mass media in the first world. The American Presidency and the controversial role of the press are debated by blending historical episodes, interviews, video and music with a strong desire to re-narrate American history. A variety of characters including presidents, media professionals, reporters, chefs and prison inmates were presented by a multi racial cast of twelve actors. White, African, American, Asian American and Latin performers enacted roles across the times of race, gender and age. To supplement the major issues of the work – mediatisation and surveillance of the press – multimedia stage played a seminal role in *House Arrest*.

The performance was liberated from the shackles of a single community or a single volatile issue to encompass a variety of issues related to history, sexuality, media, power and the internal relationship among them by embracing a wider frame of reference.
One of the major components of the complex concatenation of issues both contemporary and historical in *House Arrest* is the legacy of slavery hampered with race and sexuality. Four major facets of American ‘democracy’ are manifested through the portrayal of four Presidents intertwined with plotting, manipulation and blackmailing. The two major metaphors to signify power used in the performance are the White House and the Maryland Correctional Institute for Women.

In order to examine Smith’s performance practice as a contested contour of conventional strategies of representation, this study focuses sharply on these three performances: *Fires in the Mirror* : *Crown Heights Brooklyn and Other Identities*, *Twilight: Los Angeles 1992* and *House Arrest* in the chapters that follow.