

Book Reviews

Feminist Visions and Queer Futures in Postcolonial Drama: Community, Kinship, and Citizenship

By KANIKA BATRA

Routledge, 2011, 178 pp.

doi:10.1017/pli.2016.2

Marking the powerfully felt experience of theatrical performances—while a student and teacher in Delhi University—as the starting point of her inquiry into the form and purpose of postcolonial drama, Kanika Batra claims that drama is a “a form of public pedagogy” (26). She discusses proscenium, street, and community theater between the 1970s and the 1990s in three varying national contexts: those of Jamaica, India, and Nigeria. In these countries, she argues, neocolonial governments on the path of economic liberalization and in their desire to consecrate hegemonic heterosexual lifestyles have tended to push subaltern groups more to the margins. In addition, second wave postcolonial feminisms have paid scant and sporadic attention to sexual minorities that continue to face grueling domestic violence and social exclusion in most of the erstwhile third world. In such a scenario, postcolonial theater, working in tandem with activist groups, may generate a dialogue on citizenship by queering the dramatic discourse and showing the way to an inclusive and empowered society.

To substantiate these arguments, Batra discusses selected playwrights and theater groups and their performances. She also uses Brecht, Grotowski, and Boal’s ideas to distinguish between activist and commercial theater. For instance, she describes the emergence of feminist theater-group ‘Sistren’ and their mounting of an activist play demanding legalization of abortion in the 1990s as a logical political development following the “querying” of citizenship in Jamaica that had happened with Dennis Scott’s Brechtian and Grotowskian drama in the 1970s. In the same period in India, she continues, the Left theater group ‘Janam’ premised its women-centered themes on the struggle for equal rights that needed to be waged for both exploited workers and women victims of custodial rape and state violence. The Brechtian legacy of ‘Janam’ contributed greatly to building “a public discourse on sexuality” (92) and led to a successful “dramatization of queer subalternity in the 1990s” (110). Subsequent playwrights such as Mahesh Dattani and Usha Ganguli go on to present the state as “a feudal heteropatriarchy” (102) and make persuasive cases for changes in law and governance. In the Nigerian context, a strong advocacy for recognition of multiple sexual identities in Africa comes from the diasporic intellectual Tess Onweume. Batra gives considerable space to her play *Tell It to Women* (1992, 1997), which was conceived as a community outreach initiative as part of the internationally funded

Theatre for Development program. Circumventing the usual arguments waged against such theater by nationalist chauvinists, Batra reads the play in terms of Onweume's rejection of "both postcolonial nationalism and Western feminism as offering solutions to the problems facing Nigeria" (131). For her, Onwueme's play usefully initiates a dialogue on economic and sexual justice "by referencing African traditions of social alliances between rural women and sexual alliances between urban women" (145). Such a vision may be said to have been anticipated in the 1970s by the playwright Femi Osofisan, who in *Morountdan* had foregrounded women's equal participation in revolutionary movements. Thus, both in terms of vision and technique, Batra envisages postcolonial feminist and queer theater of the 1990s as carrying forward the subversive agendas of epic, poor, and participatory theaters while, simultaneously, recalibrating their male-centered theoretical frameworks.

There may be other equally legitimate ways of tracing the antecedents of the present-day postcolonial drama, but Batra's focus is on theater that is self-consciously directed toward "changes in social perceptions, provision of justice, and social and self-acceptance of non-normative life choices" (26). Her research is thorough, and she offers a multilayered thesis. Above all, it is her passionate commitment to cultural activism that animates her writing and makes research data and theory work together in the book which may well be deemed a commendable performance of academic activism.

ANURADHA MARWAH

Delhi University

marwah.anuradha@gmail.com

Ingratitude: The Debt-Bound Daughter in Asian American Literature

By ERIN KHUE NINH

New York University Press, 2011, 224 pp.

doi:10.1017/pli.2016.7

In its investigation of intergenerational conflict and the dynamics of the immigrant family, Erin Khue Nihn's *Ingratitude: The Debt-Bound Daughter in Asian American Literature* returns to familiar critical territory in the field, but raises new, intriguing questions. The book's propelling question is: why are second-generation Asian American daughters so often represented in the language of trauma, pain, suffering, and anger, despite the relatively comfortable and mundane conditions of their upbringing? Turning to well-studied texts such as Jade Snow Wong's *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, Evelyn Lau's *Runaway: Diary of a Street Kid*, Catherine Liu's *Oriental Girls Desire Romance*, and others, Ninh suggests that attention to the phenomenology of what she calls the