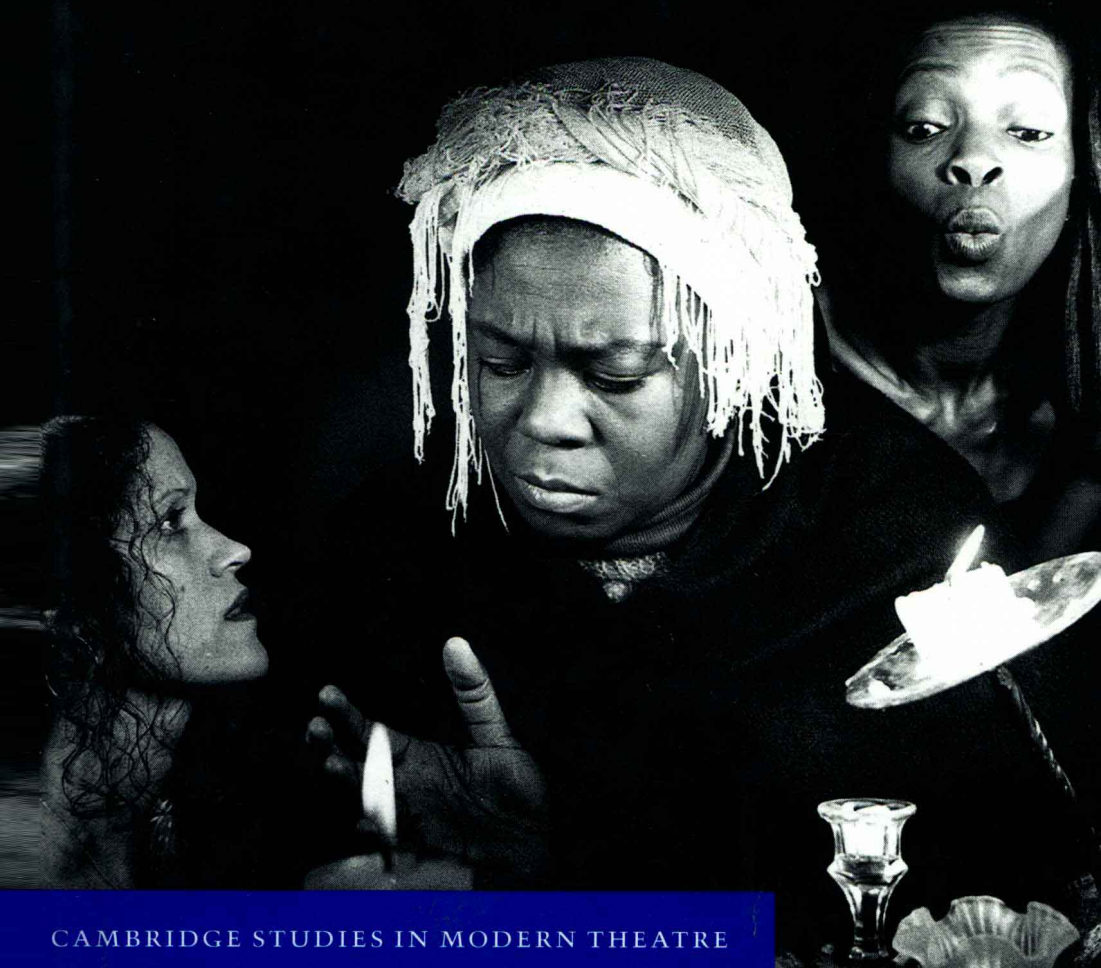


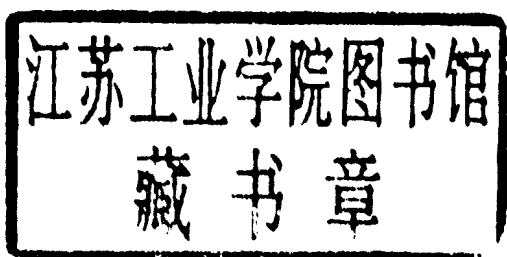
Contemporary Black and Asian Women Playwrights in Britain

Gabriele Griffin



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University of Hull



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1 Introduction

Since the 1980s there has been a steady increase in the number of Black and Asian women playwrights working in Britain.¹ In the main these are either women whose parents migrated to the UK, or women who arrived in the UK as young children, or women who were born and educated in Britain.² Frequently college- or university-educated,³ they tend to work across a range of media including radio, television, film, the newspapers, and literary forms such as poetry and fiction since it is impossible for most playwrights to make a living from their theatre work. Black and Asian women playwrights often create their plays in response to calls for submissions or commissions to write for a particular company or on a specific topic. Maria Oshodi, for instance, was asked to write a play on sickle-cell anaemia by a member of staff from the Sickle Cell Centre in Lambeth (Brewster 1989: 94). Tanika Gupta responded to a call from Talawa inviting 'new, black women to send in stage scripts' (Stephenson and Langridge 1997: 116). Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti's *Besharam (Shameless)*⁴ was written as part of Birmingham Rep's Attachment Scheme, designed to promote new playwriting and nurture young writers for theatre. The emergence and publication of work by Black and Asian women playwrights in Britain (e.g. Wandor, ed. 1985; Remnant, ed. 1986; Brewster, ed. 1987, 1989, 1995; Davis, ed. 1987; Harwood, ed. 1989; Remnant, ed. 1990; George, ed. 1993; Gupta 1997; Mason-John 1999; Rapi and Chowdhry 1998) has coincided, in Theatre Studies, with the establishment of postcolonial theatre/theory, intercultural theatre, world theatre, and performance studies. These developments reflect the hold of the globalization process on the cultural imaginary. They also bespeak the histories from which these theatres have emerged, histories of colonization, of

cultural appropriation and commodification, of cultural exchange, curiosity, transformation, and international engagement, mostly on a highly politicized, uneven playing field on which the drama of the politics of the day found – and continues to find – cultural expression in contemporary theatre, performance, and theory.

Postcolonial, intercultural, and world theatres

Neither postcolonial nor intercultural nor world theatre has paid any sustained attention to the Black and Asian women playwrights now active on the British stage. As Sandra Ponzanesi in relation to writing more generally has put it: 'migration literature and post-colonial literature in general hardly focus on the internal differences present within Europe' (2002: 211). There are many reasons for this. In the case of postcolonial theatre/theory, the focus – as the term itself suggests – has been on the relation between the colonial and what came/comes after, often very much with the head turned back towards the colonial and with an emphasis on the current cultural productions in the former colonies.⁵ 'Postcolonial theatre' indexes a political paradigm and reality shift (from colonial to postcolonial), a historico-temporal period (signifying what comes after the end of the colonial empires), and a reaction to all that coloniality entailed. Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins' *Post-Colonial Drama* (1996), for instance, centres on the drama produced in former colonies, predominantly in Africa. Gilbert's later edited volume *(Post)Colonial Stages* (1999) includes discussions of theatre from across the world, still very much roaming the former colonial territories. In its focus on the theatre of the former colonies, this work offers important insights into the transformations which the impact of colonial forces and changes in political regime have wrought upon that theatre, even if and as it critiques past colonial conditions and their impacts. It gives voice and reception to the work of those formerly colonized. But it does not engage with the work of those who migrated to Britain or who are the children of such migrants, now living in Britain. Indeed, Ponzanesi claims that 'The post-colonial debate tends to be dominated by the English language as it rotates around the axis Britain/India, re-proposing the old dichotomy of empire

while claiming to voice subaltern histories and marginal positions' (2002: 211).⁶

'World theatre' references theatre from around the world in an apparently politically and historically neutral manner that is, in fact, belied by the specificities of the 'theatres' discussed under that heading. J. Ellen Gainor's *Imperialism and Theatre: Essays on World Theatre, Drama and Performance* (1995) in every contribution challenges the assumption of a politically and ideologically unimplicated theatre. But it also frequently leaves intact the notion that theatre is sited in unitary, homogeneous geopolitical sites, referencing nations and ethnicities in ways that suggest that they have been unaffected by the flux of people, pressures of differences, and diasporic movements that go hand in hand with current forms of globalization.

'Intercultural theatre' comes in many guises but its chief characteristic is the conjunction of theatrical elements from different cultures, hence the 'inter' (see Pavis 1996). That theatre has been the object of much recent critique (see Bharucha 2000). Julie Holledge and Joanne Tompkins begin their *Women's Intercultural Performance* (2000) with the following telling words: 'Intercultural projects that originate in the west tend to focus on aesthetics first and politics second . . . Interculturalism all too frequently is perceived to become "political" only when a critic complains about (mis)representations of otherness or appropriations of culture' (1). Much of the focus of intercultural theatre has been on the conflagration of east and west, the use of Japanese, Chinese, Indian performance elements or narratives in theatre by western directors. Again, this work leaves intact a geopolitical imaginary that distinguishes, in a seemingly unproblematic way, between 'them' and 'us', between an 'other' and a 'self'.

Insofar as Black women's production for performance has been analysed, this has occurred at the intersection of postmodern, post-colonial, and subaltern theories, with drama or theatre work understood – with reference to the anthropologically based work of Victor Turner (1982) and Richard Schechner (1985; 1994) – as an extension or enactment of ritual and/or as what is now termed 'live art' or performance art (e.g. Ugwu 1995; Gilbert and Tompkins 1996).⁷

Turner's work especially, but also Schechner's, is invested in understanding performance as an evolutionary process, with continuities across time, cultures, and histories, ranging from everyday practice through ritual to 'high art'. This evolutionary model, referencing a certain cultural and historical past, is rather well encapsulated in Schechner's diagram of 'the evolution of cultural genres of performance from "liminal" to "liminoid"' that forms part of his foreword to Turner's *The Anthropology of Performance* (1987). Turner's work, more heavily anthropologically inflected than Schechner's, harks back unabashedly to 'primitive societies', 'tribal cultures', and other such vocabularies which inform what he describes in *From Ritual to Theatre* (1982) as his 'personal voyage of discovery from traditional anthropological studies of ritual performance to a lively interest in modern theatre, particularly experimental theatre' (7). Indeed, Turner's last writings before his death in 1983 were moving towards a sociobiology of performance,⁸ now of course a hotly contested terrain. Some Black and Asian British female performers' work has thus found itself the object of a certain (albeit limited) amount of attention because placing that performance work into lines of continuity which connect it with 'tribal cultures' and 'primitive societies' continues to embed that work in a postcolonial tradition which maintains those visibly different in a by now imaginary space of colonial otherness, part of the empire we'd still love to have. Avtar Brah (1996) has rightly talked of the problematic of the 'indigene' subject position and its precarious relationship to 'nativist' discourses. In some of the theoretico-critical work on performance we find ourselves back on that terrain. Indeed, Robert Young (1995) has shown how certain vocabularies, encapsulated in his work in and as the term 'hybridity', and commonly used in postcolonial theory, unselfconsciously and uncritically repeat ideas that informed the very coloniality which the new theories seek to critique.

In a thought-provoking essay Julie Stone Peters (1995) discusses critiques of postcolonial and intercultural theatre; she points to 'studies of the superimposition of European high culture on local cultures (and hence the suppression of the local); studies of the "orientalist" (inevitably falsifying) representation of the "non-Western"; studies of

the ethnographic voyeurist spectatorship that serves such representation' (200) as evidence for the west's cultural imperialism. Her argument is that many of these studies reproduce 'the history of theatre in the empires [a]s the history of two sides' (201) which 'often unconsciously perpetuate . . . the unnuanced bifurcation of West and East, First and Third Worlds, developed and undeveloped, primitive and civilized' (202). Stone Peters' attempt to rescue postcolonial and intercultural theatre from such accusations translates into an assertion of 'theatre's position as an explorer in cultural forms' (208) and a celebration of the notion of translation, of the mutability of all cultural forms, and of identity as a way forward in the debate, a plea for viewing postcolonial and intercultural theatre as expressive of (ex)change where 'what is lost in translation may be gained in communication' (206). Stone Peters' argument is in many ways persuasive although she has to lose sight of her early point that cultural exchange does not happen on a level playing field in order to make it stick. In looking for a theatre which might exhibit the transformative potential she seeks to celebrate, Stone Peters references Una Chaudhuri who discusses "'the drama of immigrants'" (196), in which an oversimplification or essentializing of cultural identity becomes untenable – in which it becomes impossible radically to subdivide the world into the "foreign" and the "familiar," the "exotic" and the "standard," "them" and "us"' (209).

The notion of the 'drama of immigrants' is contested by Mary Karen Dahl contributing to the same collection of essays as Stone Peters. Dahl refers to a discussion between her and a colleague in which she wanted to describe 'black theatre' as 'postcolonial' whilst the colleague thought it was 'immigrant drama' (1995: 40). Dahl ultimately refuses the term 'immigrant drama' after outlining the ways in which Britain's immigration policy is racist (see also Solomos 1993). Her argument is that the term 'postcolonial' gestures towards a history, that of colonization, which is conveniently obliterated by 'immigrant', a word that does not reference the prior histories that motivated that migration.

Three issues arise from these debates: one is the clear politicization of all the terms that are used; the second one is the question

of who does the naming; and the third one is the question of what realities and/or histories we wish to address through such naming. Given Britain's colonial pasts and histories of migration that involved both shipping out and shipping in, the politicized specificity of terms referring to theatre by Black and Asian playwrights is inevitable. Indeed, it is noticeable – bearing in mind how little writing on this work there is, notwithstanding the size of the actual corpus – that most of the texts dealing with Black and Asian (women) playwrights' work are explicitly political in their scope, with titles such as 'Postcolonial British Theatre: Black Voices at the Center'; 'Bodies Outside the State: Black British Women Playwrights and the Limits of Citizenship'; or 'Small Island People: Black British Women Playwrights'. All these titles also reference space, articulate explicitly or implicitly a tension between margin and centre, between inside and outside, which points to the imbrication of the *polis* as space and as political entity in the fashioning of Black and Asian identities. They tend to do so from a position permeated by a sense of colonial history, the present as expressive of the past.

The socio-cultural geographies they address are dealt with rather differently in Avtar Brah's discussion of 'the politics of location'. Understanding the importance of articulating the relationship between space, history, and present, Brah focuses on 'diaspora' as encapsulating that relationship. Arguing that 'if the circumstances of leaving are important, so, too, are those of arrival and settlement' (1996: 182), Brah explores 'how different groups come to be relationally positioned in a given context' (182–3), and proposes the concept of '*diaspora space*' (208) to designate the terrain in which, as she puts it, 'multiple subject positions are juxtaposed, contested, proclaimed or disavowed; where the permitted and the prohibited perpetually interrogate; and where the accepted and the transgressive imperceptibly mingle even while these syncretic forms may be disclaimed in the name of purity and tradition' (208). Brah's concept of diaspora space importantly entails the recognition that that space is inhabited 'not only by those who have migrated and their descendants, but equally by those who are constructed and represented as indigenous' (209). Brah argues that both migrants and those who remain in one place are

affected and effected by migration, that diaspora is the contemporary condition of being in multi-cultural spaces and that people from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds are equally shaped by diaspora, equally but not necessarily in the same way. Brah's conceptualization privileges the here and now, and it is this which makes her theoretical framework relevant here.

Empire and migration

The imaginary which nostalgically retains coloniality at its core is unsettled by the work of contemporary Black and Asian women playwrights in Britain because, as will become clear, these 'black [and Asian] voices at the center', to borrow the subtitle of an essay by Mary Karen Dahl, are not merely 'at the center' but, indeed, *of* the centre. Contrary to Paul Gilroy's assertion that *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*, this work reveals that 'black' is a constitutive part of the 'Union Jack' as a metaphor for Britain, and it is the need to engage with this constitutivity that has prompted this volume. That need arises in part as a function of the increasing, and increasingly public, debates about race relations in the UK,⁹ necessitated by continued racist attacks against Black and Asian people, racial harassment, and racialized violence in institutional and extra-institutional settings.¹⁰ These debates and the race-related tensions and violence of the period since the 1980s are themselves expressive of the socio-political changes that Britain has undergone since the Second World War. Key to those changes has been the decline of the British Empire, a much more recent occurrence than its commodification through phenomena such as the Merchant-Ivory films about India would have us believe. Hong Kong, it is worth remembering, was only relinquished in 1997. And Britain continues to exercise sovereignty over bits of land and over people geographically significantly removed from the British Isles, such as the Falklands and, closer to home, Gibraltar.

The decline of empire has been matched by successive waves of migration into Britain of people from the former colonies, of Black people from the Caribbean and various African countries and of Asian people from India, from Pakistan, and from East Africa in the wake of political turmoil there (see Wilson 1978; Owen 1992, 1993; Solomos

1993; Luthra 1997; Visram 2002). These migrants were initially encouraged to come to Britain as part of the post-war reconstruction and economic expansion.¹¹ Their arrival into Britain shattered the presumed dichotomy between Britain and its colonial 'others', creating the beginning of a transformation of what 'being British' means, a shift encoded, *inter alia*, in the various successive immigration and race relations acts designed to regulate the collapse between 'margins' and 'centre' as a consequence of migration (see chapter three in Solomos).

The migrations of Black and Asian people to Britain have their socio-economic, political, and historical, as well as geographical specificities (Wilson 1978; Solomos 1992; www.movinghere.org.uk). Whereas migrants in the mid-twentieth century, both from the Caribbean and from India and Pakistan, often but not invariably came from very impoverished rural areas, the Asians who arrived from the East African countries as political refugees during the 1970s, for instance, were frequently middle class with histories of considerable economic success. 'Black' and 'Asian' migrants to Britain thus did not constitute a homogeneous group of people, even if they were treated as such. Their diversity of backgrounds, languages, customs, religions, and everyday practices remained unrecognized as Britain, itself not a unitary entity, sought to come to terms with – as Avtar Brah has described it – its 'diaspora space'.

Brah's *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (1996) is conceptually significant for this volume because Brah seeks to shift the discourse from coloniality and postcoloniality, from migration and immigration, to *diaspora* which for her signals '*multi-locationality across geographical, cultural and psychic boundaries*' (194). For Brah 'the concept of diaspora offers a critique of discourses of fixed origins' (180), a critique all the more necessary as British identities increasingly include people of mixed-race origin (Alibhai-Brown and Montague 1992; Alibhai-Brown 2001); migrants who have settled in the UK, sometimes after successive migrations that render any notion of a fixed origin untenable; and children of migrants who were born and brought up in Britain. Moreover, and equally important, Brah argues strongly that migration impacts not only on those who migrate but