

**Contemporary Black and
Asian Women Playwrights
in Britain**

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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

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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

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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

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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

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also on the communities into which they migrate. In this diaspora space multiple subject positions occur (208); fixity of origin becomes indeterminate and identity equivocal. This 'liquid condition of modernity', as Zygmunt Bauman has termed it, is the condition in which plays by contemporary Black and Asian women playwrights in Britain have been forged, and they bear the marks of that condition.

As the preceding pages indicate, *Contemporary Black and Asian Women Playwrights in Britain* seeks to engage with a body of theatre work that has, on the whole, escaped critical attention. It has escaped this attention in my view because it does not readily fall into the remit of postcolonial, intercultural, or world theatre. The latter frequently perpetuate historical divisions by exploring 'the other' as *other*. Instead, I want to argue that although the plays under consideration bear the mark of those divisions, the work itself is produced by writers who do not necessarily view themselves as 'other' within Britain and who are now claiming their place at the table of British high culture. Their points of reference – in theatrical terms – are thus not the rituals, performances, or theatre works that are prevalent in the West Indies, parts of Africa, India, or Pakistan, but those of contemporary British theatre. These playwrights' work does not, in other words, readily fit the categories of postcolonial, intercultural, or world theatre as these are currently understood, but should be viewed as part of British theatre now. As subsequent chapters illustrate, as such this work comments on the lived conditions of diasporic peoples in contemporary Britain, giving voice to their preoccupations and experiences. My concern, expressed through the thematic approach taken in this volume, is thus with the issues raised in this work and their relation to contemporary Britain.

Naming identities

To talk of the work of Black and Asian women playwrights instantly begs the question of what 'Black' and 'Asian' mean. Both terms have political and cultural histories in the UK that are very different from their histories elsewhere. These histories have been variously charted (e.g. Wilson 1978; Mama 1984; Gilroy 1992, 1993; Mason-John 1995, 1999). As Mary Karen Dahl, looking in from the outside, observes

of Britain: 'Hegemonic political and popular discourses combine diverse groups representing diverse cultures into a single category, the "not white"' (1995: 52). Playwright and performer Valerie Mason-John, commenting from within, graphically endorses this view: 'We were all wogs, all niggers, all coons. As a young child . . . I was called coloured along with children of Indian, Pakistani, Chinese, and Japanese descent, and anyone else who didn't resemble white' (1999: 11). During the late 1970s and early 1980s in the UK this homogenization in part led to a politics of coalition-building and strategic political alliances among people of West Indian, African, Indian, Pakistani, and other diverse origins, fuelled by a desire to achieve greater visibility and political impact through such coalitions. The history of the Organization of Women of Africa and African Descent (OWAAD), renamed the Organization of Women of African and Asian Descent, is instructive here and illustrative of that phase of identity politics and coalition-building that, *inter alia*, shaped the race politics of the UK in the 1980s (see Mason-John 1999: 12–14; see also *Feminist Review* special issue on *Black Feminist Perspectives*, 17, Autumn 1984). The 'blackification' of women from diverse communities in Britain facilitated the adoption of the term 'black' as the signifier of a political allegiance of people who suffer/ed racialized oppression in Britain.¹² It also related to the (re-)appropriation and revaluation of the term 'black' as one associated with pride and power. Mason-John argues that 'during the 1970s it seemed quite clear that women of African, Caribbean and Asian descent were black' (1999: 12). However, it also became clear that the strategic utility of the term had its limits in the very different needs and issues diverse communities faced as is expressed in the plays written by women from these very different communities. In the same way that the question of arranged marriages, for instance, does not affect Caribbean communities, so the issue of single motherhood tends not to be foregrounded within Asian communities.¹³ The recognition of these differences led to the demise of OWAAD and, more generally, to the foregrounding of diversity as key to contemporary Britain.

The homogenizing term 'Black' can no longer easily be used in 2003. There is a recognition now, for instance, that contemporary

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British culture has been differentially shaped by Black and Asian influences. Whilst the popular music and dance scene of the 1980s and early 1990s, for instance, was strongly influenced by Black cultures of various kinds, meaning cultures that bear the signature of African, Caribbean, and Black American backgrounds, the 1990s and early years of the twenty-first century have seen the rise and increasing visibility of Asian cultures in Britain. West Indian carnivals have been matched by Asian melas in towns such as Leeds, Bradford, Manchester, Leicester, and London. In 2002 in Britain much publicity was given to the arrival of *Bombay Dreams*, a Bollywood musical brought to the British stage with a script by Meera Syal, by now a household name in the UK through the television series which she co-scripts and in which she stars such as *Goodness Gracious Me* and *The Kumars from No. 42*, as much as her acclaimed novels *Anita and Me* and *Life Isn't All Ha-Ha, Hee-Hee*. Zadie Smith's novel *White Teeth*, an epic about multi-cultural twentieth-century Britain, has been televised. Bollywood is widely discussed and can be viewed in all major British cities as well as on late-night British television. There are numerous theatre companies such as Kali Theatre Company, Clean Break, Red Ladder, Pilot Theatre Company, and others, which promote new work by British Asian – as well as Black – women playwrights. Bands such as Asian Dub Foundation have generated new fusion sounds that collapse cultural boundaries. The cultural identity that diverse Asian communities have carved out for themselves in Britain during the 1990s is both prominent and distinct from Black British cultural identities and operates across somewhat different cultural terrains. In the Britain of the twenty-first century both 'Black' and 'Asian' presences thus mould British culture in different but highly articulated ways.

Recognizing diversity

To understand the work of Black and Asian women playwrights in Britain, one needs to understand something of the patterns of migration underlying the emergence of that work. The patterns of migration which have informed the arrival of Black people in Britain are distinct from those of Asian people though much of the migration by Black and Asian people into Britain took place after the Second

World War and in many ways mirrors Britain's colonial history. The arrival of the SS *Empire Windrush* in 1948 saw the entry of some 400 British subjects from the Caribbean into Britain (see Solomos 1993; Wambu 1998). Mass migration from the West Indies thus in some respects preceded migration from African countries, and also that from the Indian subcontinent. These migrations, a function of both labour market opportunities in the UK and changing economic and political climates in the countries from which people migrated, are the histories which inform the plays by Black and Asian women in Britain, frequently providing the central dynamic of the plays as their characters seek to live the diasporic lives which those migrations have meant for them.

As this volume demonstrates, diversity among Black and Asian populations, as much as between Black, Asian, and white populations, is central to the diasporic identities they – we – inhabit. Many plays by Black women playwrights, for instance, *inter alia* thematize the issue of the differences between Black people coming from African countries and Black people coming from the Caribbean. In Maria Oshodi's *The 'S' Bend* (n.d.), for example, her mother forbids Fola, one of the protagonists, to go to a party with the words: 'You mix with all these West Indian people who never pick up a book and read; do you want to end up like them? Go to your room and study, don't talk to me about West Indian parties!' (1, 3: 6). When Fola tells her West Indian friend Claudette that she is not allowed to attend the party, Claudette responds: 'You're under that African woman's power a bit too much' (1, 4: 19). And when a white girl, Mya, asks Fola about the differences between West Indians and Africans, Fola asserts that they have 'a different sort of general outlook, values, I suppose' (1, 6: 28), which she characterizes as 'A high educational value in the African, and I guess a high material value in the other, coupled with a lack of cultural identity' (1, 6: 29). Fola's view is that whilst Africans and West Indians can mix – her best friend, after all, is West Indian – 'one of the two has to make a sacrifice – SELL OUT, and too often, in most cases, it's the African half' (1, 6: 29). In her attempt to resist the materiality and loss of cultural identity she ascribes to West Indians, Fola in the end decides to return to Nigeria, inspired by a talk with her uncle:

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he showed me the possibility of avoiding a sell out. He seemed to understand my feelings precisely. He had been brought up in England himself and found that the only way to escape the pressure of conflicting cultures was to completely avoid them and live in a less conflicting environment. This can only be done in your own native land, so he suggested I try life in Nigeria for a while.

I thought about this for weeks. To accept a total change to a new life-style; would it work in my case? I tried to visualize my future in England and just saw a life torn by my submission to superficial cultural groups. This would mean a continuation of the confusion . . . I may stay in Nigeria just long enough to gain some sort of identity, strong enough to keep me afloat for when and if I return to England. But, whatever the outcome, Mya, the feeling of NOT completely selling out is a feeling that has totally re-shaped my views and my life. I've managed to carry out my own small rebellion.

(1, 7: 45)

Fola's response is of course only one version of how one might deal with diversity; her repatriation at the end of the play, both into the 'custody' of her uncle and into the country her parents came from, as well as her insistence on the possibility of the preservation of a singular specific identity under diasporic conditions, raise as many questions about female identity as they seemingly resolve for Fola. The point here, however, is the articulation of differences among Black people, the assertion of (a not invariably celebrated) diversity in a context – Britain – where homogenization is the norm. Indeed, as the discussion of Ahmad's 'Song for a Sanctuary' in chapter five shows, such differences, emblemized in Ahmad's play in the clash between two Asian women with radically different diasporic histories and trajectories, are themselves often a source of conflict and are presented as such in many of the plays, providing both dramatic tension and narrative movement.

Brah's argument concerning diaspora space constitutes a significant rupture with those postcolonial positions that continue to

operate in homogenizing and binarist terms. It also opens an avenue for considering new identities as they emerge and are articulated in the twenty-first century (see, for example, Ang 2001). The monolithic 'Black' or 'Asian' – which often figures as an ascription – is thus invited to contemplate identities that refuse such homogenization (see Ang-Lygate 1997). Geraldine Connor's self-description in her afterword to the programme for *Carnival Messiah* (2002), for instance, states:

In this third millennium, I see myself as a living exponent of the meeting of Europe, Africa and Asia four centuries ago, the living product of African enslavement, of European colonisation and domination and of the ensuing crosscurrent of latter-day mass migration from the Caribbean to Britain. I carry all that cultural baggage with, I am what is defined as a 'New European'.

(n.p.)

When I contacted writer Rani Drew¹⁴ about her work she emailed me with the following comment:

I do not seem to fit the bill of either Black or Asian Women. I resist the category and the concept. I wouldn't have come to England, if I wasn't married to an Englishman. So, I didn't come as an immigrant and can't be defined as the first or second or third Asian (not so young) immigrant generation. Again, I resist the definition.

(personal communication, 29 June 2002)

Interestingly, Drew's play *Myself Alone/Asia Calling* (1996) focuses on a man, the child of a Hungarian father and an English mother, seeking to establish a sense of identity by travelling the world in pursuit of the occult and a spirit world that eludes him. Forever confined to an imaginary and a real liminal space, the man recounts his father's theory of the origins of the Magyar people: 'When you see a peasant in the countryside leaning on his spade and gazing eastwards, be sure he is listening to the call from Asia' (2–3). Here Asia figures as a non-specific eastern source of origin quite different from the ways in which Asia

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is presented in other plays by 'Asian' women playwrights. The play offers testimony to the potency of the imaginary in shaping people's lives.

Signatures of diaspora

Black and Asian women playwrights' work bears the signatures of the multi-locationality that informs their lives. Many of these scripts are written specifically for Black and Asian actresses and actors, something which rarely if ever occurs in plays by white (women) playwrights who are entirely unused to contemplating either themselves as in any way 'coloured' or the fact that they inhabit diasporic communities.¹⁵ Plays by Black and Asian women playwrights thus provide performing/acting opportunities for women from diverse ethnic groups who are still rarely seen on the British stage. As Maria Oshodi in her preface to 'Blood Sweat and Fears', for instance, put it: 'I felt the need to provide good, strong main characters for young black actors' (94). Black and Asian women playwrights thus also place such actresses at the centre of the action, asking the audience to focus on people from social groups that are not often present in high-cultural forms.

Secondly, playscripts by Black and Asian women playwrights tend to thematize issues of race, colour, and ethnicity. They may do so in the form of an afterword that disavows these issues (see, for example, Rudet, as discussed in chapter seven of this volume) but whereas white playwrights do not usually feel compelled to comment on issues of race, colour, and ethnicity at all, thus reinforcing the frequently discussed fact that dominant cultures register no awareness of their specificities,¹⁶ Black and Asian women playwrights virtually invariably do. Indeed, many of their plays, as this volume shows, focus on issues of race, colour, and ethnicity as key determinants of their characters' experiences. This is almost inevitable given the political climate in Britain in which questions of difference, migration, ethnicity, and regulation are perennially high on the agenda. Despite this, it has to be recognized that not all women playwrights of diverse ethnic origin centre their work on these issues. Ayshe Raif, for instance, the daughter of Turkish-Cypriot immigrants, is much more preoccupied

with relations between women than with thematizing issues of race and ethnicity. Her play *I'm No Angel* (1993) centres on Mae West and her relations with various people as she asserts – and this is one of the central concerns of the play – that ‘There ain’t nothing closer in life than a mother and daughter. A mother and her child’ (2, 2: 52). Another play, *Café Society* (n.d.), features three elderly women who meet regularly in a café (the title functions ironically here, providing an antidote to the actual corner café that is the women’s regular meeting-place) in Hackney in London. Their interdependence and regular meetings are temporarily threatened when one of them starts to think about moving to another part of London and another one is courted by a man who wants her to move in with him. They all have Cockney accents; their colour, race, or ethnic background are never mentioned so that they could be played by white or black actresses, for example, but this is not specified. In fact, one might argue that the play constitutes a version of Anton Chekhov’s *Three Sisters*¹⁷ since it features three women who are peers and have a close long-term relationship dreaming of a change that ultimately never takes place. Raif’s plays ‘Caving In’ (1990) and ‘Fail/Safe’ (1991) similarly do not foreground race or ethnicity issues – their focus is much more on other key concerns and relationships that affect women’s lives. So, although the thematization of race, colour, and ethnicity may function as one of the signatures of Black and Asian women playwrights’ work, this is not inevitably the case.

Apart from writing for Black and Asian actresses, and thematizing race, ethnicity, and colour, Black and Asian women playwrights prominently engage with historical and contemporary social and political issues that impact on their communities in particular ways, not only in Britain but also in the places from which they migrated to Britain. Migration thus features both as a historic and as a contemporary phenomenon. In the plays it takes several distinct forms:

- the contemplation of migration within a certain home setting;
- migration within the country one was born in – usually from country to city;
- migration to another country, usually the UK, and its impacts;
- the contemplation of migrating back home for those who came to the UK in the middle decades of the twentieth century;

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- travel to countries from which parent generations migrated, a kind of impermanent reverse migration;
- making a life in a Britain in which Black and Asian people are categorized as migrant figures by virtue of their appearance, no matter what their individual histories are;
- breaking with one's community as an effect of changing values and attitudes across generations and between women and men, a migration effect;
- living in peer groups outside specific ethnically and/or racially defined communities as a function of one's particular history, development, and identity, another migration effect.

Pinnock's 'A Hero's Welcome' (1989), for instance, addresses the issue of the return of a Jamaican man who has fought for the British in the Second World War to his village in 1947. His presence stirs the imagination of other island inhabitants, who consider whether or not to leave to make their fortune elsewhere. Lisselle Kayla's 'When Last I Did See You', too, centres on the question of whether or not to migrate from Jamaica to the UK, Cuba, or America. In Prabjot Dolly Dhingra's *One Night* (1996) and Maya Chowdhry's *Kaahini* (1997) the issue of migration from India to Britain becomes fatefully entangled with sexual and emotional choices. Both Tanika Gupta's *Skeleton* (1997) and Rukhsana Ahmad's *Black Shalwar* (1998) explore migration within India from rural communities to the city and the impact this has on the protagonists' lives. They map geographies of unbelonging and liminal states as their characters seek to come to terms with the alienation that migration, even within one country, entails, signalled by the impossibility of a return to the place left behind. The nostalgia that the desire for return – to the place from where one has migrated, to the state one was previously in – engenders is manifested in plate 1, in which the characters from *Black Shalwar* are posed gazing longingly and wistfully down and off-centre to the left, a backward-looking gesture rather than a forward-looking one. Their conventionally romantically encoded body positioning, the male 'protectively' embracing the female from a position of relatively greater height (she leans into him), references the posters of romantic Bollywood movies, the stuff



Plate 1 Adele Selim as Sultana and Ashvin Kumar as Khuda Buksh in Kali Theatre Company's 1999 production of *Black Shalwar*.

that dreams are made of with all its lack of groundedness, a key feature of that play.

Migrating 'back home' is a key issue in plays such as Jacqueline Rudet's 'Money to Live'. In this play, the father of the central character wants to return home to live a life free from racism, economic exploitation, and insecurity. Moving down a generation, travel to countries from which parent generations migrated, a kind of temporary reverse migration, is at the heart of Maya Chowdhry's 'Monsoon', Ahmad's *River on Fire* (2000), Pinnock's 'Talking in Tongues', and her play *Mules*. The impact of these reverse migrations is discussed in

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chapter three of this volume. Making a life in a Britain in which Black and Asian people are categorized as migrant figures – with all that that entails in terms of social exclusion – by virtue of their appearance, no matter what their individual histories, is perhaps the most common form that the theatricalization of what one might term a ‘migration effect’ takes. Jacqueline Rudet’s *God’s Second in Command* (1985), Mary Cooper’s ‘Heartgame’ (1988), Meera Syal’s ‘My Sister-Wife’ (1993), Paulette Randall’s *24%* (n.d.), Yazmine Yudd’s *Identity* (2000), Zindika’s ‘Leonora’s Dance’ (1993), and Winsome Pinnock’s *Water* (2000) all speak to that experience.

Breaking with one’s community as an effect of changing values and attitudes across generations and between women and men, itself a migration effect, underlies the dynamics of plays such as Grace Dayley’s ‘Rose’s Story’ (1985), Rukhsana Ahmad’s ‘Song for a Sanctuary’ (1993), and Kaur Bhatti’s *Besharam* (2001). These breaks are almost always involuntary on the part of the female characters who decide to move out of their communities, involving violence both psychological and physical to effect ruptures that mark the characters’ exodus in a frequently tragic manner. Living in peer groups outside specific ethnically and/or racially defined communities as a function of one’s particular history, development, and identity, another migration effect, occurs in Zindika’s ‘Leonora’s Dance’, in Kaur Bhatti’s *Besharam*, in Jackie Kay’s ‘Chiaroscuro’, and in Valerie Mason-John’s ‘Sin Dykes’ (1999). Here the characters form part of peer communities, determined in the latter two cases by issues around sexual identities rather than racial/ethnic ones. In consequence, the plays have protagonists from a number of – rather than just two as is more commonly the case – different cultures and ethnic/racial backgrounds, offering a more consistently multi-cultural, as opposed to bi-cultural, view of contemporary Britain.

If migration in its various effects constitutes one major topic in Black and Asian women playwrights’ work, so does spirituality. A common feature of plays by Black writers is the construction of the religiously over-invested mother or parents who drive their children away through a failure to understand that religion has a different place



Plate 2 Shiv Grewal as Bobby Siddiqui, Parminder Sekhon as Zara Metha, and Shelley King as Seema Siddiqui in Kali Theatre Company's 2001 production of *River on Fire*.

in contemporary Britain than it has in the parents' lives. Typical examples include Zindika's 'Paper and Stone' (1989) and 'Leonora's Dance', Oshodi's *The 'S' Bend*, Dayley's 'Rose's Story', and Kara Miller's *Hyacinth Blue* (1999). Part of this differential investment in spirituality manifests itself in scripts by Asian women in the construction of ghostly presences. For example, in Ahmad's *River on Fire* one of the central characters, Seema Siddiqui, comes back to life after her death and watches the impact of her death on her three children (see plate 2). Similarly, in 'Song for a Sanctuary' Pradeep, the abusive husband of Rajinder, hovers as a ghostly and threatening presence over his family (see plate 10 on p. 155). In Gupta's 'Skeleton', the skeleton in question comes alive at night as a beautiful woman. In her play *Sanctuary*, the shadow of a woman appears as one of the characters tells her story (1, 3: 45–6). Yudd's *Unfinished Business* (1999), a play that defies the naturalistic boundaries with which it opens, raises questions as to the materiality of one of its characters as its narrative