

The “Diasporic Theatre” from nostalgia  
to contemporary socio-politics:  
reimagining identity in some contemporary  
Black and Asian British playwrights

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Truly contemporary plays are the ones in which the audience recognizes itself. Or ones which split audiences down the middle. [...] The best make us reconsider what we are, rewriting our idea of ourselves, and of the nation.

(Aleks Sierz)

British theatre has undergone dramatic changes over the last few decades, which mirror the enormous changes in British society. As Ubersfeld suggests, the two phenomena are indissolubly linked:

The position of theatre is dangerous and privileged at the same time; theatre, more than any other art, because of its text-performance articulation, and especially because of its material and financial stakes, shows itself to be a social practice (Ubersfeld, 4).

In particular, since the 1980s there has been an increasing number of Black and Asian playwrights working in and writing about Britain. As Aleks Sierz puts it in his book of the title *Rewriting the Nation: British Theatre Today*, such theatre is part of what is usually known as New Writing, a kind of theatre attempting precisely to “rewrite the nation”. According to Sierz, New Writing scripts are “plays that are written in the great tradition of British text-based theatre, which re-establishes itself in the brave new state-funded postwar world”: their aim is to “show the nation to itself” and “what makes new writing special is that it is written in a distinctive and original voice that speaks of the here and now. And that it does hold up a mirror to the nation” (18). This mirror has been held up to Britain in several ways: from the aggressive, political orientation of the plays of the ’60s, to the controversial gender issue and homosexuality on the one hand and the obsession with Thatcherism and the market on the other in the ’80s, to the extreme provocations of “in-yer-face theatre” in the ’90s, to the revival of political drama after 9/11. In particular, this article will focus on the diasporic theatre of such writers as Tanika Gupta, Roy Williams and Kwame Kwei-Armah, a kind of theatre which distances itself both from the postcolonial tradition and from the generation of the in-yer-face theatre and attempts rather to redefine British identity through a “hybridisation” of the theatrical discourse. According to Gabriele Griffin, the emergence and consequent publication of such works “has coincided, in Theatre Studies, with the

establishment of postcolonial theatre/theory, intercultural theatre, world theatre, and performance studies" (1). However, postcolonial theories, as Ponzanesi puts it, have often focused on the dichotomy empire/former colonies, without analysing the condition of the diasporic, migrant writers, living in Britain and trying to forge their hybrid identity, posing the question of what it means to be British (20). Therefore, from now on I will refer to "diasporic writers" following Brah's intuition in *Cartography of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*, where the discourse is shifted from postcoloniality and immigration to diaspora, defined as "multi-locationality across geographical, cultural and psychic boundaries" (194). These writers also distance themselves from the literary panorama of the in-yer-face theatre, as they challenge the audience in a different way. If in-yer-face theatre is a form of experiential theatre whose goal is to shock, question moral norms, smash taboos, mention the forbidden and create discomfort, often showing nudity or sexual violence onstage (Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre*, 35), diasporic theatre challenges our notions of nation and identity at their very roots, by digging into the past experience of migration and investigating the present struggle between integration and alienation. What is unique in this generation of diasporic writers is the condition of duality and the hybrid position from which they write, which compels them to "perform identity" (Griffin, 173). In fact:

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Diasporic identity demands the management of an unsettled self, of a subject permanently *entre-deux*, in process rather than 'becoming', without a necessarily teleological structure to support that process and relieve it of some of its destabilizing impact. This is particularly evident in the context of the lives of second-generation migrants (Griffin, 77).

Emblematic of this condition is the successful *East is East* (1997) by Ayub Khan-Din<sup>1</sup>, a portrait of an Anglo-Pakistani family torn between two cultures. The play is set in Manchester in the 1970s and centres on the life of a married couple, Ella and George – respectively an English woman and a Pakistani man – and their struggles to keep their family together while their six children discuss whether they are English, Pakistani or a mixture of both, and whether they want to follow Muslim tradition or adapt to the English culture into which they were born.

Diasporic writers refuse conventional labels, as they find themselves caught up in a perpetual conflict and attempting to create identities that defy the borders of the modern concept of the Western sense of belonging to a nation. Their works move from one nation to another, from one culture to another, without a clear cut

1. Ayub Khan-Din was born in 1961 and grew up in Salford, Manchester. Apart from *East is East*, among his most successful plays we can remember *Last Dance at Dum Dum* (1999), a play about Anglo-Indians living in Calcutta as well as a political critique of Hindu fundamentalism; and *Rafta Rafta* (2007), a comic adaptation of the play *All in Good Time* (1963) by Bill Naughton. The play is set in the working-class English town of Bolton, and examines a story of marital difficulties within an immigrant Indian family.

division between here and there, between home and abroad. If many postcolonial writers set their works in their countries of origin, the tendency today is to frame the plays within Britain, as Griffin confirms:

whereas during the 1980s the plays were dominated by inter-generational conflicts as expressive of the difference between the adult subject who migrated and the child who, so to speak, *was migrated*, [...] by the 1990s plays tended to focus much more on how to live in Britain now, beyond the experience of the moment of migration (Griffin, 25).

This tendency is reflected in the microcosm of some diasporic writers. Roy Williams<sup>2</sup>, for example, once stated that his body of work “is in two halves: the early plays were very reflective and personal where characters reflected on the past; my later plays are more objective, commenting on what’s going on now” (qtd. in Middeke, Schneider and Sierz, 489). Through these two stages, diasporic writers shape their own definition of identity; first, through the confrontation with one’s past and the different attitudes that the first and second generation of migrants have towards Britain, dwelling on disappointed dreams, personal relationships and often relying on magic and myths; secondly, through the problematisation of race politics and a renovated interest in politically and socially committed theatre.

To the first group belong such works as *Skeleton*, *The Waiting Room* and *Inside Out* by Tanika Gupta<sup>3</sup>, *Elmina’s Kitchen* by Kwame Kwei-Armah<sup>4</sup> and *The No Boys Cricket Club* by Roy Williams. All these plays are characterised by the presence of the issue of how to deal with one’s past. However, the outcomes are quite different. Gupta’s play *Skeleton*, first performed in 1997, is set in Bengal and draws on two ancient myths: on the one hand, the figure of a skeleton who comes back to haunt the living, and on the other hand, the infatuation with one’s beauty and the obsession with preserving it at any cost, including death (Middeke, Schneider and Sierz, 226). Significantly, the play also problematises gender roles and cross-generational expectations, dwelling particularly on the struggle for independence – always dreamt of but never fully achieved – of the female characters. Similarly, *The Waiting Room* (2000)’s central character is Priya, a middle-aged woman who has died unexpectedly of a stroke. She returns to earth as a spirit and is given three days to confront her past before going to the heaven-like ‘waiting room’. In this play the writer attempts to come to terms with the death of her father and his history of

2. Roy Samuel Williams was born in 1968 in London. He is a well-known Black British dramatist. Among other awards, in 2008 he received the award of an OBE for services of drama.

3. Tanika Gupta was born in 1963 in Chiswick. She is a successful British playwright of Bengali origins. She has won significant awards for her work, including the John Whiting Award in 2000 for *The Waiting Room*, the Asian Women of Achievement Award in 2003 and an MBE in 2008.

4. Kwame Kwei-Armah was born in London in 1967. He is considered one of Britain’s leading Black playwrights, especially after the enormous success of *Elmina’s Kitchen* (2005), the first non-musical play by a Black author staged in the West End. After tracing his ancestral line to Ghana, he changed his name from Ian Roberts to Kwame Kwei-Armah as he refused “to carry the legacy of slavery around in his daily life” (Middeke, Schneider and Sierz, 323).

immigration, as well as cope with the protagonist's sense of failure at not having fulfilled her dreams and having become nothing more than a housewife. The play relies heavily on magic; the staging of the supernatural and the rewriting of ancient myths – as happens for example in Pinnock's<sup>5</sup> *Leave Taking* – are quite common features in many early diasporic plays. Griffin argues that:

In common with *Skeleton* and many other contemporary plays by black and South Asian playwrights, this work naturalises the spirit world on stage, attempting to give equal status to material and immaterial bodies. This poses a challenge on contemporary Western stages where, despite a tradition of such productions reaching back to Shakespeare and beyond, secularism has psychologised and thus interiorised the immaterial (Middeke, Schneider and Sierz, 227).

A similar play is Roy Williams' *The No Boys Cricket Club*, performed in 1995. The play centres on Abi, a sixty-year-old Jamaican woman living in London and struggling to hold her family together. She finds comfort and refuge in her past with her friend Masie, literally encountering her past self on stage. When they meet, Young Abi accuses her older self by yelling at her "You did it, didn't you, you gave up, that's why you're here [...] You see me? This Abigail Sanford would never give up. I know who I am, I don't know you. I hate you" (Williams, *Plays: 1*, 61/63). The question "What happened to my dream?" that Young Abi asks older Abi is a pivotal one and resonates throughout the play, its counterpart being Masie's claim that Abi's problem is that she stopped wishing (Williams, *Plays: 1*, 26). According to Osborne, Williams "represents a particularly uncompromising vision of a diasporic (dis)inheritance in a London working-class community beset by domestic violence, neighbourhood fracas, male profligacy and drug dealing" and consequently "the primary affirming space for his protagonists lies in their nostalgic pre-migratory past" (49). Another play by Williams which explores the same topics is *Starstruck* (1998), whose central theme is once again that of disappointed dreams. The main character is a dissatisfied middle-aged Jamaican woman ironically called Hope, who dreamt of finding the happily-ever-after fairytale in England but instead ends up left on her own and pregnant and thus lives out her hopes and dreams through her son. In these two plays Williams questions the reality of the immigration experience, showing how for many immigrants the reality of Britain was not what they had hoped for (Rubasingham in Williams, *Plays: 1*, xviii). Williams neither condones nor condemns the choice made by the previous generation of migrants, he simply attempts to depict the external situation as well as the inner conflicts they had to face. Another writer who realistically depicts the conflicts and

5. Winsome Pinnock, a British playwright of Caribbean origins, was born in 1961 in London. Her play *Leave Taking* (1987) dramatises the efforts of first-generation migrants from the West Indies to forge a Black British identity in Britain. In the play, the mingling of the ritual practice of *obeah* and Western conventional medicine are a powerful metaphor for the character's hybrid identity.

struggles of contemporary Britain – or, rather, contemporary London<sup>6</sup> – is Kwame Kwei-Armah. In his *Elmina's Kitchen* (2003) he addresses the complex and urgent social issue of “Black-on-Black” violence, and at the same time explores the conflicts between three generations of Black fathers and sons (Middeke, Schneider and Sierz, 325); second-generation Deli, who owns a café, his Caribbean father Clifton who has returned to England for the funeral of his older son Dougie, killed immediately after he was released from prison, and Ashley, Deli's teenage son. The plot revolves around Deli's failed attempts to prevent Ashley from being involved in a criminal life by the local gangster Digger. The writer pointed out that this play was originally written as a warning to his ten-year-old son about the “dangers of aspiring towards the glamorised gun violence represented in gangsta rap culture” (Middeke, Schneider and Sierz, 327) and the dangers of peer pressure. The character of Digger embodies the stereotypical idea of Black masculinity, another myth which makes it difficult for Black British men not to identify with a culture of violence.

If the plays belonging to the first group attempt to define identity as a result of a combination of inheritance of the past and experience of the present, focusing on the roots of the process of migration and the generational conflict, those belonging to the second group, that of political theatre, “a very popular genre emerging from the turbulent, radical intensities of the 1970s” (Kureishi), try to examine identity from a socio-political perspective. Among the first diasporic playwrights, perhaps one of the most important is precisely Hanif Kureishi, born in 1954 in London to a Pakistani father and an English mother. His works are set in a multi-cultural London where his characters deal with issues of generation, class, sexuality and gender. At the heart of his research lies the contested issue of what it means to be of Asian origin in Britain today, thus disrupting simple, fixed notions of identity. In 1981, *Borderline* was the first play by an Asian writer to be produced on the main stage at the Royal Court. It was a piece of political theatre about the 1979 Southall riots, dealing with the issue of the unstrained violence of the police. In an article he wrote in 2006 in *The Guardian* on the occasion of a re-staging of *Borderline* twenty-five years later, Kureishi argues that, although political theatre became unfashionable after the 1990s, today we need it more than ever as “in this age of mendacity, deception and violence, there is the need, once again, for public debate about contemporary issues” (Kureishi). It is interesting to notice that the great majority of diasporic writers have at some point engaged in writing a political play; some of them problematise the age-old issue of slavery, like *Statement of Regret* by Kwame Kwei-Armah, whose title was inspired by Tony Blair's “statement of regret” that no apology would be made for slavery; others are pieces of verbatim

6. It is interesting to notice that many of these plays are not set generically in England, but more specifically in London. Sunetra Gupta and Hanif Kureishi have often made the point of being from London, and not from Britain. For further reference see B.T. Williams, “A State of Perpetual Wandering”: Diaspora and Black British Writers'. [postcolonialweb.org](http://postcolonialweb.org), JOUVERT: Journal of Postcolonial Studies, 1999.

theatre or docu-drama, like Tanika Gupta's *Gladiator Games*, an investigation into Zahid Mubarek's brutal racial-motivated murder which took place at Feltham Young Offenders institute, and tackling the related issue of institutionalised racism; recently, the figure of the asylum seeker has been featured a number of times, as in Tanika Gupta's *Sanctuary*; still others dramatise the issue of segregated communities and alienation from mainstream society, like the "incendiary play" *Fallout* by Roy Williams, which investigates a racially-related murder; yet others deal more specifically with issues of inter-racial relationships and racism in multi-ethnic Britain, like Tanika Gupta's *Fragile Land*, Roy Williams' *Lift Off*, or *Sing Yer Heart Out for the Lads*, a nationalist debate happening in a pub during a World Cup football match; another subcategory deals with the war in Iraq, like Williams' *Days of Significance*, exploring the behaviour of British troops abroad; others are "state-of-the-nation plays", like Williams' *Category B*, a realistic drama about life in prison, or Kwei-Armah's *Seize the Day*, where he imagines a black candidate in the running for Lord Mayor of London; finally, others aim at provoking and challenging stereotypes, like Tanika Gupta's *Sugar Mummies*, which looks at female sex tourism in Jamaica and criticises both the black and the white characters in an equally acerbic manner (Naffis-Sahely).

From these plays emerges an image of national identity, of Britishness which is no more than a state of the mind, a fluid concept that has to shape and re-shape, define and re-define itself continuously. These writers seem to inhabit what Appadurai calls "imaginary worlds" (329), forming what Bhaba called an "imaginary community" (qtd. in Bronwyn T. Williams). How is it possible to frame one's identity in a society which marginalises or rejects hybridity and forces definitions upon its citizens? A kind of society which measures the right to belong in quantitative terms can only lead to violence, as happens in Williams' *Sing Yer Heart Out For The Lads*, where the dialogue between Mark, a Black embittered ex-soldier and Alan, a white political racist, is emblematic. Alan sees British identity as being exclusively white and justifies his belief in terms of cultural inheritance: "All white people are racists. [...] Our history, our culture, our jobs, people on TV, it's all white, if not predominantly. It's not by coincidence, it's by design. Being white is the norm. It always has been. We are the norm" (Williams, *Plays*: 2, 187) and reprimands Mark for defining himself as British, or with a significant slip, as English:

MARK. I'm English.

ALAN. No you're not.

MARK. I served in Northern Ireland. I swore an oath of allegiance to the flag. [...] How English are you? Where do you draw the line as to who's English? I was born in this country.

ALAN. [...] The fact is, Mark, that the white British are a majority racial group in this country, therefore it belongs to the white British (Williams, *Plays*: 2, 218).

However racist and prejudicial, Alan's assertion gives voice to a belief shared by many, and this is the central point of Williams' social critique, namely the necessi-



ty for honest dialogue between people who belong to different cultures and have different concerns and needs:

ALAN. [...] I think we've got to get through that, because if people can't talk to each other, different communities, being honest, we are not going to get anywhere. [...] If you want to stop people from being like me, then you had better start listening to people like me (Williams, *Plays*: 2, 214).

The culture of violence is harshly criticised: it is not a matter of white versus Black or colonised versus coloniser any longer. It is rather a plague that affects all British society, and the colour of the skin or the origins of one's ancestors play no part in immunising them. After all, as Richard Bean said when talking about his play *England People Very Nice*<sup>7</sup>, today the debate is no more about skin colour, but rather about culture (Sierz, *Rewriting the Nation*, 214). Nevertheless, the unsolved ambiguity that lies at the heart of the matter is that for diasporic people the problem is not that of integration, as it used to be for the first generation of migrants; it is rather that of dual identity, which makes them at the same time integrated and yet estranged. Of course, identity has to do with the ever-recurring cycles of human history, as yesterday's migrants become today's citizens who might become 'teachers of Britishness' for the new generation of migrants. This is what happens in Kwame Kwei-Armah's *Let there be love*, where Alfred, an old man of Caribbean origin at the end of his life develops a platonic friendship with Maria, a Polish girl who will help him come to terms with his past and at the same time restore the relationship with his daughter. Whenever Maria makes a mistake while she is talking, Alfred corrects her bitterly, but when she attempts to suggest that since he has spent "forty-five years, three months and two weeks in England, then 'he is English'", he shouts back at her "don't you ever call me that!" (Kwei-Armah, *Plays*: 1, 277), suggesting that language and culture do not necessarily overlap. Often there is no correspondence between one's present and one's past, which makes it even more difficult to create a sense of identity. Kwei-Armah's works are pervaded by a sense of loss, of grief for the loss of a culture felt by those who are denied a present British identity as well as being deprived of their past. *Statement of Regret* dramatises the process of deculturalisation consequent to the slave trade which was to lead to "generations of African Caribbeans not knowing where they originated from or what their original language might have been" (Kwei-Armah, *Plays*: 1, 4). Those who are denied their history are denied an identity, as "a community without knowledge of itself, its history, soon self destructs because the present isn't big, strong or robust enough to sustain the needs of fully rounded human beings" (Kwei-Armah, *Plays*: 1, 3).

7. *England People Very Nice* (2009) is a play by Richard Bean which tries to cover more than four hundred years of the history of various migrations into London's East End. However controversial, Bean is certainly one of the few playwrights who has fully grasped the idea of a mongrel Britain (Sierz, *Rewriting the Nation*, 219).

Histories of migration are often histories of violence; in this respect, an emblematic figure is that of the asylum seeker in Tanika Gupta's *Sanctuary* (2002). First of all, the choice of setting is interesting. In fact, the action takes place in a graveyard, described as a "small Eden-like, neat patch of luscious green packed with shrubbery, ornate flowering plants (orchids) and small tubs of herbs" (Gupta, *Sanctuary*, 15). The abundance of foreign plants mirrors the jumble of people who gather there: the female vicar Jenny Catchpole, the Muslim gardener Kabir, the refugee from Rwanda Michael, the West Indian photographer Sebastian, a half-Turkish teenager with Scottish, Irish and Norwegian ancestors. Griffin argues that:

*Sanctuary* creates a diasporic space in the graveyard and church grounds which act as the site for multi-cultural encounter simultaneously exploding any idea that the experience of war and violation is specific to one nation, one site, one history, and suggesting that the displacements generated by political conflict create new and fragile micro-communities which remain haunted by their diverse pasts (Griffin, 228).

Both Kabir and Michael are haunted by the violence they had to witness in the past. Kabir was forced to witness the rape and killing of his wife, and is unable to forgive himself for failing to save her. Unlike him, Michael, who is a Bantu and turns out to have brutally murdered thousands of Tutsis during the Rwandan wars, is fundamentally unrepentant and tries to justify his racist prejudices and his political views to justify his deeds. In the end, Michael is killed by Kabir, who seeks atonement for his past failure. According to Griffin, the fact that this murder occurs in a graveyard, which in the play symbolically contains the remains of both colonial empire and of the church as an institution, stands for the impotence and unreliability of institutions (Griffin, 232), a theme that Gupta explores also in *Gladiator Games*, where prison officers are suspected of playing an extremely dangerous game:

A game played by prison officers in Feltham known as 'Gladiator' or 'Coliseum' [...] The prisoners could be one black, one white, one big and one small, one bully paired with another bully. Whatever the combination, the intention was to see whether or not the two fell out and came to blows (72).

Similarly, Roy Williams' *Days of Significance* (2007) features the character of Jamie who, on being accused of torturing Iraqi prisoners, hides behind the excuse "It was an order!" (Williams, *Plays*: 3, 264).

Thus, lack of historical and political awareness, creeping ignorance and racism, together with a severe lack of ethical values emerge as the evils of contemporary British society, a plague that leads to the culture of violence. The diasporic playwrights try to set themselves free from all possible definitions, in some cases even refusing the label 'Black and Asian British', like Roy Williams who declared "I am a playwright full stop. [...] I don't write because I am black but because I am a writer. [...] Black playwright, coloured playwright, brown playwright, whatever.



Just as long as they don't miss out the word playwright" (qtd. in Middeke, Schneider and Sierz, 506); or Tanika Gupta, who has pointed out in many interviews that she does not like being identified as an Asian writer:

"I don't like being seen as an Asian writer, in terms of being labelled in that I only write for Asians and that's the only thing I can do. I don't like that. I mean, you don't hear Tom Stoppard being referred to as a Czech writer or Harold Pinter as Jewish writer, so why should one be termed in that way?" (qtd. in Naffis-Sahely).

Robin Cohen wonders whether such a label might simply become "another way of marginalizing those not recognized as part of the dominant culture's discourse, particularly in terms of liberal multi-culturalism" (Cohen, 35). The fact that these writers often cast Black or Asian actors, or use specific linguistic markers such as patois, or particular dress codes is not particularly challenging in contemporary multi-cultural Britain. The real challenge is that the audience – be it mostly white, Black, Asian or mixed – is asked to reconsider their fixed notions of identity and belonging, to rethink their mental image of Britishness and at the same time to acknowledge the new face of theatrical discourse. The attempt of these writers is not to create a parallel stream of narrative to run alongside the dominant one, nor is it an attempt to assimilate their otherness into the dominant discourse. Bronwyn T. Williams, in his article entitled "A state of perpetual wander": Diaspora and the Black British Writers' argues that theirs is

an attempt to disrupt the narratives forged to define the dominant culture, to hybridize the discourse, to reconfigure the concept of all cultural identities as fluid and heterogeneous. Instead of seeking recognition from the dominant culture or overcoming specific instances of political injustice, the work of these writers endeavors to reconfigure these relations of dominance and resistance, to reposition both the dominant and the marginalized on the stage of cultural discourse, and to challenge the static borders of national and cultural identity (B.T. Williams, 2).

In conclusion, one of the consequences of the spread of the phenomenon of theatrical New Writing is the contemporary abundance of plays about Black and Asian communities by diasporic writers living in Britain. Since when dealing with theatre we are dealing with a tripartite system consisting of the playwright, the staging and the audience, it is probably fair to conclude that today there is a strong necessity for such plays. Many theatres have specialised in New Writing, like the Royal Court in London, and some directors are willing to give a chance to these plays, like Trevor Nunn did in 2002 with the theatrical season called Transformations, which involved the staging of plays by Tanika Gupta and Roy Williams. However different and challenging, it must not be forgotten that these plays are above all contemporary plays, no less contemporary than those written by white playwrights such as Martin Crimp, Mark Ravenhill or Sarah Kane, being contemporary in their language, subject and theatre form, confrontational and provocati-

ve, politically and socially committed. Their uniqueness and urgency reside in the fact that they explore the diasporic space in order to redefine what it means to be of Black or Asian origin in Britain today, especially for that second generation of migrants who were British born. They do it both by exploring different moments of the migratory and diasporic movement and by interrogating the present, opening up a new social debate which aims to re-shape our concepts of race, identity and nation. In Sierz's words, "images of national identity are always a political statement, and politics is about changing things. But before you can change anything, you have to imagine it differently" (Sierz, *Rewriting the Nation*, 241). And this is precisely what diasporic playwrights do: they rewrite the concepts of nation and identity by reimagining reality.

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