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Book Review

PERFORMANCE AND COSMOPOLITICS: CROSS-CULTURAL TRANSACTIONS IN AUSTRALASIA

by Helen Gilbert and Jacqueline Lo, Hampshire and New York:
Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, pp. 245. ISBN: 978023000348.

Reviewed by:

ANAND PRAKASH

EMAIL: anand1040@gmail.com

Associate Professor (retd.)

Hansraj College, University of Delhi

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Performance and Cosmopolitics: Cross-Cultural Transactions in Australasia by Helen Gilbert and Jacqueline Lo, Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, pp. 245. ISBN: 978023000348.

Reviewed by: Anand Prakash, Associate Professor (retd.), Hansraj College, University of Delhi, Delhi.

This book is part of the series, 'Studies in International Performance', in association with the 'International Federation of Theatre Research'. Its focus is on cosmopolitanism envisioned as cultural mobilisation on a world scale. Human beings are assumed to be 'cultural animals', bringing forth ideas of combined effort that is mutually beneficial. We can take the view that humans could not have taken the path of productivity and sustenance of life had they not grasped the principle of coexistence. The binding factor is joining hands on planet Earth. Humans also have a penchant for celebrating an occasion. They help one another as a positive norm, and share happy moments in phases of life. Later, many such moments grew in proportion and became household names for larger performances in which thousands would participate directly. The appeal for such events came from democratic living. Did these throw up a cultural view of their own? The question is worth going into. As Gilbert and Lo point out:

This 'world show stopper', as one newspaper termed it, was an emphatically global and local performance, designed not only to capture the imagination of a vast media audience but also to present the nation to itself through popular and allusive iconographies. In line with the generic template for such events, the performance explicitly modelled the social values behind Olympism: global democracy founded on harmony and community among individuals, cultures and nations (2009: 1).

In the context of the present study, the opening ceremony of the Sydney Olympic Games was an example of a spectacle. The Australian nation presented to the world the larger than life episode on the lines of the global 'nation' and showcased cultural diversity as resting vitally on 'harmony' and 'community-living'. Yet, the book raises the question of the validity of such claims, wondering whether this was indeed the case. And if not, the purported aim of such spectacles had to be analysed. Gilbert and Lo cite the Sydney Cornulla Beach Riots of 2005 as a challenge to the claim. It flew in the face of harmony. The 'promise of cosmopolitanism as the enactment of universal *communitas*' and its limits as a theory of 'embodied material praxis' came under a cloud (2009: 4). They take it as a subject of contention for relooking the authentication that Sydney provided to the concerned theory of cosmopolitanism.

For Gilbert and Lo, theatre and the performing arts come handy in this context. They might be placed within the ambit of the globalised market so that the 'Kantian ideal of universal community' was tested and 'new kinds of cosmopolitanism arising from the commercialization' and 'cultural difference' were explored (ibid.: 6). It results in the authors making a case for a cautionary understanding of cosmopolitanism. They identify what they call a thin cultural cosmopolitanism, 'mix and match' cultural fusion, for a working

description of the phenomenon. As against this they undertake the idea of ‘thick’ analysis. Marking a difference from the USA which promotes multiculturalism only to ‘smuggle in nationalism’, the present authors call Australia a distinct case.

The book has seven chapters in addition to the Introduction and Conclusion. The first chapter, ‘(Anti-) Cosmopolitan Encounters’, analyses the beginnings of cross-cultural encounters and the way in which ‘whiteness, Asianness and aboriginality’ are located. Specifying this as a study not merely of Australia but of cross-cultural encounters in the transnational region, Gilbert and Lo define the geographical space as follows:

Australasia is thus sometimes used in an expanded sense to include Asia, particularly when the focus is on region-based cultural, social and political relations. Our study of cross-cultural transactions in Australasia takes its cue from this emerging sense of the term; we deliberately foreground the position of Aboriginal performance cultures in this regional grid, not only because of their intrinsic importance to our study but also to acknowledge precolonial cartographies and patterns of Asian–Aboriginal cultural trade (ibid.: 17).

The chapter looks at Aboriginal Corroboree performances for white settlers as an example of how those were subsumed within the rhetoric of the white settler. If something in it did not earn approval, it was dismissed as ‘an exotic spectacle’. The Aboriginal performances were considered on a par with Asian cultural forms such as the Chinese opera and Japanese circus acrobatics. Pursuing this trajectory, the concerned activities became ‘colonial cosmopolitanism’ and ‘theatrical orientalism’.

However, the impact of the socialist movement in the 20th century brought about a crucial change. This also affected cultural facets such as performances. Yet, discrimination against the Aboriginals, miscegenation and white cultural supremacy clouded these changes and led to a great deal of complexity.

The second chapter analyses the evolution of Aboriginal Theatre that engaged with colonisation and contemporary politics, as well as gender roles and communal identities. Aboriginal theatre has simultaneously ‘evolved a strategy of multiple audience address’ consisting of white Australian and non-Australian addresses (Kelly, 2001: 8, in Gilbert and Lo, 2009: 48) as its possible sites of production.

Gilbert and Lo track this flowering of Aboriginal theatre in Australia’s official Bicentenary in 1988. Simultaneously, the counter-bicentennial protests have also been recorded:

Broadly speaking, then, the counter-bicentennial protests performed the ideological work of indigenizing heritage, where heritage is understood as ‘the mobilisation of historical understanding or social memory in institutional and citizenly terms’ (Chris Healy, 2001: 279 in Gilbert and Lo, 2009: 52)

The support and participation of the white theatre companies to this movement strengthened the ‘industry’s engagement with aboriginality’. This led to a process of ‘reconciliation’, which may have been linked to the idea of nation building. It ushered in a new phase in cultural politics. Varied responses to these exercises brought into being other strategies of sharing and creating histories. Significantly, this merged with the trend of what came to be called the exoticisation of the Aboriginal. The spectacle of the Olympic Games played a part

in it. The authors discuss the placement of Aboriginal performing arts within a commodity culture in the globalised world. This enjoys the advantage of ‘market value’ and the accompanying ‘exoticism’.

In the chapters that follow, the authors clarify boundaries not simply of Australia, but also of Australasia, that includes the Asian within the Australian imaginary. The chapters look at Asianization—the combination of ‘representation’ and ‘performance aesthetics’ that get recognised as international theatre festivals in Australia and other countries. Chapter 4 contains a discussion of the Adelaide Film Festival, chapter 5 presents three different case studies adopting the cosmopolitical approach to aesthetic ‘glocalisation’—the cases range from indigenous performances of European canonical texts; performance as hybridity, expressing the change in Australian–Japanese relations; and, finally, an analysis of the Suzuki method. Chapter 6 uses Dipesh Chakravarty’s ‘provincial’ cosmopolitanism, and Homi Bhabha’s ‘vernacular’ cosmopolitanism as part of the argument. Hybridity is shown to be the stabilising factor between cultures. The discussion distinguishes thin from thick cosmopolitanisms, the two forms of hybridity. One is the ‘happy’ hybridity that functions as a stabilising factor. The other is

[a] more carefully differentiated application of the term [that] tends to circulate mostly in postcolonial studies where hybridity potentially unsettles and dismantles hegemonic relations because it is focused on the process of negotiation and contestation between cultures. It is this second, critical approach to hybridity, perceived not as a natural outcome of cultural mixing but rather as a form of political intervention, that we are keen to explore in relation to the cosmopolitics of Asian Australian theatre (Gilbert and Lo, 2009: 168).

The argument defeats the unifying claims of cosmopolitanism. Instead, it brings out difference centred in power relations with help from cosmopolitics. The dialectic of ‘politan’ and ‘politics’ works to the disadvantage of the supposed harmony. Meaningfully, the last chapter is titled, ‘Performance and Asylum: Ethics, Embodiment and Efficacy’. The mutually disagreeing nature of the words in the title cannot be missed. The ‘refugees and asylum seekers’ makes us reassess the cosmopolitan model and note the lacunae. Performances aiming to represent these people expose the nation’s imaginary unmistakably. The cold response of Australia is out in its true colours and the issue of refugees seen through the performing arts.

The book realises its purported aim set out in the Introduction—the cross-cultural currents in the changing historical milieu underline challenges emanating from socio-cultural and economic developments. The book’s location of Aboriginality at the centre of the discussion makes the case fool-proof against Australasia failing to do justice to the cause of Aboriginal performing arts. Cosmopolitical discussion of Aboriginal theatre and the processes of indigenising theatre in Australia are studied in the background of global market transactions. The book is a thought-provoking read.