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Unveiled: interrogating the use of applied drama in multiple and specific sites

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This article examines a view of site through postcolonial feminism to suggest that multiple and contradictory discourses of culture, location, gender and context are all vital in an understanding of a specific site when working with a community. These views are applied to a project undertaken with a group of Asian women in Britain exploring issues surrounding self-harm, highlighting the importance of taking multiple positionings into account when using drama exercises. In addition, the author's own location as researcher/facilitator within the project is seen as 'site-specific', questioning motivation and position within the project. Through the lens of postcolonial feminism, the idea of a fixed boundary of ‘site’ is re-located to suggest a place where identity is continually in process within the local and the global.

Site, position and identity in postcolonial feminism

In the introduction to his book on site-specific art, Nick Kaye cites the following definition of ‘site’: ‘The place or position occupied by some specific thing. Frequently implying original or fixed position (Onions, 1973)’ (Kaye, 2000, p. 1). This article examines the notion of site and location from the perspective of postcolonial feminism to suggest that for the applied drama practitioner, the idea of site and place needs to be reconfigured and remapped to be seen instead as multiple sites in shifting locations, rather than being a singular ‘fixed position’, and how this understanding of site and place relates to a sense of personal identity which is also shifting and in process, rather than fixed. Each site has to be understood within its own context, to be ‘site-specific’. And yet each also needs to be seen in relation to the other sites that operate with it to create a particular experience. These sites may be physical in terms of the body, geographical, cultural, imaginary, theoretical or political. They include the different locations and positionings of both the applied drama facilitator, and those they are working with. This requires the ability to shift between sites, and move through multiple and often contradictory viewpoints at the same time. The intention in this article is to propose that this ability is not only vital
within applied drama in terms of ethics and working methods, but also ultimately offers a way to understanding the potential ability that this has for articulating the many voices positioned within a specific location and situation.

These issues will be examined in relation to an applied drama project undertaken with a group of Asian women in a community centre in Bristol. This specific diaspora positioning demonstrates the interrelationship between site, place, community and identity, and the importance of this understanding for the applied drama practitioner. Postcolonial feminism offers a means to articulate the specificities and diversities within such a location. For Lo and Gilbert, ‘[w]hat postcolonial theory offers ... is a framework for analysing such thorny issues as agency, hybridity, and authenticity. ... This contextualizing enables us to ask ... questions about individual and collective power’ (Lo & Gilbert, 2002, p. 44). Postcolonial theory has been increasingly used in various fields of geography by such figures as Claire Dwyer and Sarah Radcliffe, as a means to question identity in relation to geographical positioning and socio-cultural movements. Dwyer states: ‘I theorise identities as contextual and relational positionings ... which are articulated across different spaces and at particular moments. Such identifications are not fixed or completed but always “in process”’ (Dwyer, 1999, p. 6). For Radcliffe,

these geographies of identities ... provide positionalities. In theoretical terms, such a relationship between community, place and identity implies that previous discussions of national identity have not sufficiently taken on board the multiple geographies in and through which subjects articulate and imagine their communities and places. (Radcliffe, 1998, p. 290)

An approach to identity which is always ‘in process’ in relation to specific positionings and locations, may potentially suggest a way in which applied drama can offer a means for constructing an individual site of identification that acknowledges the ways in which the site is multiply and specifically created.

There are a number of key issues relating to applied drama which will be discussed within this framework:

- the need for multiple and contradictory viewpoints to be taken into account;
- the appropriation of women’s issues and rights in specific cultural contexts; and
- the personal responsibility and situation of the facilitator.

These issues will be explored in the context of selected writings from postcolonial feminists that focus on location, appropriation and the construction of knowledge, which may offer a useful reflection on the ethics, practice and working methods of applied drama. This will then be examined through the case study of a practice-based research project I have undertaken exploring the reasons for the high incidence of self-harm among Asian women in Britain, and the related use of applied drama exercises in a specific community situation. As part of this project, I ran a series of workshops with Asian women in a community centre in Bristol. The specificity of this context in terms of the issue, the culture, the community and the location, has raised pertinent questions relating to the use of applied drama with a particular
ethnic group, the notion of identity and dis/re-location within an immigrant community, the appropriateness of the methods and drama exercises used and the positioning of the researcher and workshop-leader working in this way. It can indeed be considered as site-specific, where the idea of site operates on many levels: the women’s bodies become the physical site of the act of self-harm; there are specific culturally-embodied patterns of behaviour and expression; the community of Asians in Britain is a place for exploring location, identity and transformation; and the particular group of Muslim women from Pakistan in a community centre in Bristol is a specific site with a unique understanding and experience of belonging and difference.

The importance of the specific site of a particular community not only geographically, but also socially and politically, is vital within applied drama in order to understand the positioning of that community in relation to the formation of knowledge and personal empowerment. As Amanda Stuart Fisher states, the work of the applied drama practitioner must ‘be informed by an ethics of practice that can be responsive and responsible to each of the different contexts in which we work’ (Stuart Fisher, 2005, p. 247). Postcolonial feminist Lata Mani has explored the significance of

the questions of positionality and location and their relation to the production of knowledge as well as its reception…. Feminists have called for a revised politics of location—‘revised’ because, unlike its initial articulation, the relation between experience and knowledge is now seen to be one not of correspondence, but fraught with history, contingency and struggle. (Mani, 1989)

She proposes the need for a reviewing of the idea of site and location to take into account multiple sites and ways of knowing, and cites Chandra Mohanty’s (1987) argument:

[D]eveloping a politics of location requires exploration of ‘the historical, geographical, cultural, psychic and imaginative boundaries which provide the ground for political definition and self-definition’ (Feminist Encounters, 31). Location, in her terms, is not a fixed point but a ‘temporality of struggle’ (40), characterized by multiple locations and nonsynchronous processes of movement ‘between cultures, languages, and complex configurations of meaning and power’ (42). These processes, in Mohanty’s view, enable ‘a paradoxical continuity of self, mapping and … political location…. [M]y location forces and enables specific modes of reading and knowing the dominant. The struggles I choose to engage in are then the intensification of these modes of knowing’ (42). (Mani, 1989)

**Appropriation and objectification in the ritual of sati**

The issues raised from postcolonial feminism were very apparent to me during the undertaking of the project concerning the issue of self-harm among Asian women in Britain. The project began with my combined research into the Indian ritual of *sati*, including ways in which the voice and narrative of the women concerned have been
appropriated as the ground for other agendas, and questioning whether culturally-specific patterns of suicide and self-harm have migrated to Britain along with the increasing diaspora of Asians. I am going to begin the discussion of the project by briefly contextualising the ritual of sati, charting aspects of its historical development and manifestation in India. This will of necessity be a limited discussion of sati, with only selected aspects of its history in a very specific context for the purposes of this article. Sati is essentially the ritual of a Hindu widow dying on her husband’s funeral pyre. This has traditionally been seen as a religious act, as, through her burning to death, she becomes purified and deified, and walking to the pyre unveiled, is transfigured into the living embodiment of a goddess: she doesn’t just commit sati, she becomes sati. The word ‘sati’ in this context is usually translated as ‘good wife’, and the ritual is bound up with patriarchal definitions of women in terms of the notions of duty, honour and shame. The terms izzat (honour) and sharam (shame) will appear later in connection with issues of self-harm among Asian women in Britain.

The ritual of sati and the women who commit—or become—it, have been appropriated by different groups in a variety of contexts. The first major legislation of the British-run East India Company was the Abolition of Sati Act in 1829. Sati became a metaphor for the whole of India needing to be saved by the British, to be rescued, educated, modernised, and protected. This discourse displays, according to Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, ‘an essentially fixed British attitude to sati. By foregrounding Hindu women as passive and unresisting victims of Hindu patriarchy . . . it could be established beyond argument that the women were in need of saving’ (Rajan, 1993, p. 290). The individual woman and her subjective agency in sati is appropriated and objectified by the colonial discourse to justify the invasion and governing of India as being a humanitarian act. Spivak broadens this to suggest that the woman-as-passive-victim is the landscape for the justification of imperialism/globalisation in creating a homogenised humane and civilised world: ‘Imperialism’s (or globalization’s) image as the establisher of the good society is marked by the espousal of the woman as object of protection from her own kind’ (Spivak, 1999, p. 291).

In this discussion of sati, the women concerned have been used as the site for other individuals, communities and powers to represent their own views, in effect silencing the voice of the women themselves. Even though they may have traditionally walked to their deaths unveiled, their individual subjective agency remains firmly veiled behind those who define them: they are seen and yet are invisible at the same time. Not only the geographical and historical space, but the bodies of the women become a specific site of epistemological and ontological location. This is particularly seen through the lens of postcolonial theory, which
look at how resistance is expressed in relation to performative bodies, how those bodies encode difference and specificity. (Lo & Gilbert, 2002, p. 47)

In *sati*, the female body is marked by mutilation through fire, and transformed into an object by the hegemonic power, which refuses the existence of her individual subjectivity.1

**Izzat, sharam, and self-harm: approaching the workshops**

These issues in *sati* of appropriation, the removal of the subjective agency of the individual woman, notions of *izzat* and *sharam*, and the mutilated body-in-pain, proved to be just as important when I began investigating the reasons for the high incidence of self-harm among young Asian women in Britain, up to three times higher than among white and Afro-Caribbean women (Bhat & Taylor, 2004, p. 16). And many of these incidents are a result of self-burning, a common example being through pressing a hot iron on the skin. When I first started this research project, I didn’t want to make any possibly essentialist connections between South Asian women in this country self-harming through burning themselves, and the ritual of *sati* in India, but research by the Newham Asian Women’s Project in London has found that 20% of suicides among South Asian women in this country are committed by the women setting fire to themselves, a method of suicide almost unheard of among non-Asians. According to the report from the project, ‘the research suggests that Asian ... women may [have] culturally specific patterns of suicide’ (Newham Asian Women’s Project, 1998, p. 9), as well as self-harming.

Self-harm was defined by Babiker and Arnold in 1997 as

> any act which involves intentionally inflicting pain with an aim to distract, release or counteract emotional distress, feelings of guilt, shame, and/or provide an emotional outlet for expression. Essentially, ... self-harm is a coping strategy for dealing with unbearable emotional pain and distress which otherwise cannot be articulated. (Bhat & Taylor, 2004, p. 11)

Some of the reasons given by Asian women in Britain for this need for a coping mechanism of physical pain which acts as a release from, and containing of, emotional distress, include struggles with identity, violence, abuse, relationship problems, parental control, racism and a feeling of isolation. It can also be a way of coping with self-hate and low self-esteem, and a need to punish themselves because of feeling shame and guilt, to refer back to the notions of *izzat* (honour) and *sharam* (shame) that were discussed in relation to *sati*. It is the code of honour, *izzat*, that ‘involves expectations to be perfect, self-sacrificial and conforming to rigid gender and culturally defined roles’ (Bhat & Taylor, 2004, p. 22). There is an expectation that women uphold the honour of the family by being the dutiful and obedient wife or daughter, who accepts or tolerates domestic violence rather than leaving home. If she doesn’t behave according to this code of honour, then she can bring shame, or *sharam* on her family, and be ostracised not only by the family, but by the wider
community. This is why many South Asian women feel that they cannot walk out of an abusive marriage because it would bring shame on their family and community. Findings from the Newham Asian Women’s Project suggest that even to admit that there is a problem either within the family or to outsiders is considered as sharam, so some women stay silent about their problems, and use self-harm as a way of dealing with them.

Bearing these issues in mind, I needed to attempt to deal constructively with the specific cultural, gender and individual needs of the women I was working with, and a number of ethical and practical questions arose. The term ‘Asian women’ has been used throughout this article, but the word Asian is itself a homogenised label, covering an enormous area with a multitude of different countries and cultures. Even to focus just on the Indian subcontinent necessarily involves having to take into account the large number of religions, languages, and ethnic differences. My intention was to attempt to facilitate sessions which would allow the women to explore various means of self-expression, of finding and using their own voice, which might help to reduce the pressure of the build-up of emotional energy, and so alleviate the need to self-harm. The Newham Asian Women’s Project explains that a long-term way of dealing with self-harm is to ‘encourage alternative ways to express feelings and emotions, e.g. talking, writing, drawing’ (Bhat & Taylor, 2004, p. 14). My particular method is through the use of drama, which I have been doing in community contexts since 1992, developing a framework of sessions that includes using breathing and relaxation exercises, drama games, role-play and forum exercises. I was asked to run some workshops with one group in a community centre. Although the co-ordinator of the centre was keen for me to do the workshops because of the number of women there she knows self-harm, she did not feel it would be appropriate to state that I was looking directly at issues of self-harm, because this would be too threatening to introduce at the outset. Therefore the sessions were more generally aimed at well-being and self-expression as a means for allowing the women an avenue to articulate problems in their own lives, in a way that may help to release the build-up of pressure that can lead to self-harm.

I realised very quickly I had to adjust my habitual and familiar working methods to take into account the culturally-specific needs of this particular group in this context, which challenged my own naïve assumptions about the way I approach using drama in this way. Aged from 18 to 60, the 12 women who attended all had Urdu as their first language, which I cannot speak, and only two of them could speak English. This meant in part having to rely on translation, but also finding new ways of communicating and doing the exercises, which allowed them the voice they needed to be able to express, rather than my preconceived ideas of the form their voice should be. Drama and theatre are often regarded with great suspicion by members of the Asian community, and the women on the workshops had no experience or familiarity with western forms of theatre or drama exercises. In addition, the notion of ‘therapy’ in relation to drama can equally be regarded with suspicion and distrust, in part because this again can be seen as a culturally-specific ‘western’ approach. Ivy I-chu Chang encountered a similar situation when examining the use of Gestalt
therapy and psychodrama with children in Taiwan to help them deal with post traumatic stress disorder: ‘In some villages in central Taiwan, local people... find western concepts of psychotherapy or therapeutic theatre quite foreign’ (Chang, 2005, p. 285).

At the beginning of the workshops in Bristol, the women were all fairly shy, self-conscious and uncertain. In order to establish a safe environment for them, I began with using some basic children’s games to create a space where they were allowed to just play. Through this, they began to relax and enjoy themselves in a way that they said they were not able to do in their lives. One of their favourite games was pretending to be different animals. One elder, who had been very cautious in participating up to that point, suddenly moved quickly around the room in imitation of a tiger. She explained afterwards that she was simply never allowed to be ‘tiger energy’ in her life, and that instead she was often made to feel invisible within her home and community, leading to feelings of low self-esteem. The other women agreed that this was a key issue for them, and that the pressures of izzat in terms of the expectation of how they are supposed to behave, makes them feel unable to express themselves freely in their lives. Low self-esteem, along with associated feelings of guilt and shame, is one of the main causes of self-harm among Asian women in Britain (Bhat & Taylor, 2004, p. 18), so to have a space where they could articulate this, and through a simple game feel able to release some of the built-up pressure, had a very positive effect for them. What also proved to be beneficial in these terms were the yoga relaxation and breathing exercises. They all acknowledged how stressed they felt, and how much physical tension they had, and they appreciated doing the yoga where they could just be quiet, and breathe and stretch, and have some time for themselves. These somatic exercises became an important part of the sessions, and this reduced the time that was spent on what might be considered to be more ‘traditional’ applied drama techniques, and yet this was what was needed by the women for their personal transformation in that community space.

Location of the site-specific researcher/facilitator

The specific sites of the workshops, in terms of the women themselves, their cultural background, and the particular place and context of the community centre, indicate the importance of needing to take these multiple viewpoints and sites into account. I also had to question my own site-specific position within the project. The women I was working with were all Muslim, having either migrated or being second generation from Pakistan, speak Urdu, and wear a veil in public. I come from a different background in terms of country of origin, religion, language and culture. Do I have any more of a right in terms of understanding or familiarity to work with these women because I am also labelled as ‘Asian’? Kalwant Bhopal had similar questions when she conducted a research project into dowries with South Asian women in London:
Although I was an Asian woman conducting research in an area with which I was very
familiar, I was still not a blood-related member and was not from the same community,
hence I was regarded as an ‘outsider’. . . I was very similar to my respondents, yet very
different. It was evident I was regarded as being privileged: from a middle-class
background and a member of the academic elite. My identity as an Asian woman
enabled me to empathize with my respondents, but at the same time emphasized the real
differences between us. (Bhopal, 1995, p. 157)

This was reflected in my own experience in working with the specific group of
women in Bristol, in that there was certainly a level of acceptance by them in my role
as facilitator because of being Asian, which the leader of the community centre stated
would not have happened otherwise. Yet it was also important for me to acknowledge
the differences, and not to assume that the working methods I had used in other
contexts would be appropriate for this particular group of individuals. As Kalwant
Bhopal points out: ‘As researchers we must not impose our definitions of reality on
those researched. . . . We have to take into consideration who the researcher is and
who the researched are’ (Bhopal, 1995, pp. 155, 157). This is also clearly relevant for
the practice of applied drama, both in terms of the motives and responsibility of the
facilitator, and also in the appropriateness of the chosen methods and exercises for
the particular context of the individuals and community with whom the facilitator is
engaging. As well as being a practitioner, I have also had to question my role as
‘academic researcher’ within the project, to examine my own motivations in terms of
potential appropriation of the issue and the women themselves within an academic
context. It has been necessary to view my own multiple sites and positions within the
project to ensure that in dissemination of the work, including within this article, I
attempt to be clear with what is my own ‘voice’, whilst also acknowledging the
different voices of the women I worked with.

The idea of diverse and specific sites of identity in terms of physical and geo-
political location is fundamental when examined through the diaspora/migrant space.
It is not only the sense of ‘home’ and ‘identity’ which is dis/re-located, but also the
body and, in the project discussed, the scarring and marking of bodies through self-
harm which creates an inscribed outer landscape that is a reflection of, and release
from, inner oppression. For the applied drama facilitator, and the academic
researcher, the use of postcolonial feminism can offer a means to attempt to
articulate ways in which knowledge and identity are multiply constructed in relation
to sites and positionings. To refer back to the use of postcolonial feminism within the
field of geography, Sarah Radcliffe states that

[feminist geographers, in their deconstruction of hierarchies of knowledge and the
articulation of multiple forms of difference, have often viewed postcolonial approaches
sympathetically. . . . Postcolonialism moreover can be deployed to challenge the static
boundaries around area studies, contributing local-scale analysis and giving voice to
subjects marginalized. (Radcliffe, 2005, pp. 295, 296)

The shift from a static, fixed boundary in terms of mapping of nationhood or cultural
identity, to instead acknowledge the importance of the local and the site-specific in
terms of ethnicity and diversity, where identity is continually negotiated and ‘in
process’ in relation to the multiple positionings which an individual inhabits, offers potential for new and diverse theoretical and practical approaches for a form of drama that is ‘applied’ to working with intervention and transformation within a community, and for the individuals who form that particular community space. This project and my reflections on the experience of both myself and the women involved, has led to an interrogation of identity, subjectivity and dis/re-location within a world of shifting boundaries of self and community, as well as the position and appropriate use of applied drama within the diversity of locally and globally specific sites.

Note
1. In India today, there have also been instances where women have set fire to themselves as a sign of resistance to the abuse they are experiencing.

Notes on contributor
Jerri Daboo is a lecturer in Drama at the University of Exeter, UK. Her research focuses on an intercultural and interdisciplinary investigation of the body in training and performance. She has also worked in the field of applied and community drama for 14 years.

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