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Captivating Verbatim Account of Historical Events in Ana Deaver Smith's *Fires in The Mirror*

Prof Ansam Riyadh Abdullah Almaarof (Ph. D)*

Tikrit University-College of Education for Women-English Department

Sbc.su2000@gmail.com

&

Shrouq Gheny Atew

Tikrit University-College of Education for Women-English Department

shrouqgheny@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Fires in the Mirror is a play by Anna Deavere Smith that uses verbatim theatre to explore the 1991 Crown Heights riot in Brooklyn, New York. The play consists of a series of monologues in which she embodies the personas of various people involved in or impacted by the riot. Each monologue is a verbatim transcript of what the interviewee said during an interview with her. By performing these verbatim monologues, Smith authentically portrays the voices and emotions of the people she interviewed. It offers her a multi-faceted and profoundly human perspective on the Crown Heights riot. It highlights the underlying issues of racial and religious divisions while underscoring the importance of empathy and understanding in times of crisis. *Fires in The Mirror* as

* **Corresponding Author:** Ansam Riyadh, Email: Sbc.su2000@gmail.com

Affiliation: Tikrit University - Iraq

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verbatim theatre shows how authentic storytelling can deeply connect us to real-life events. It reminds us that theatre can be a powerful tool for understanding others' experiences and raising awareness about important issues.

Keywords: Verbatim Théâtre, Crown Heights Riots, Authentic Story-Telling, Historical Events.

المسرح الحي الأسر للاحداث التاريخية في مسرحية "حرائق في المرأة" لأن ديفر سميث

أ. د. أنسام رياض عبدالله المعروف
جامعة تكريت - كلية التربية للبنات

و

شروق غني عطوي
جامعة تكريت - كلية التربية للبنات

المستخلص

طنيران في المرأة هي مسرحية لأنا ديفر سميث تستخدم المسرح الحي لاستكشاف أحداث أعمال شغب كراون هايتس في عام 1991 في بروكلين، نيويورك. تتألف المسرحية من سلسلة من الشهادات الفردية التي تجسد فيها سميث شخصيات مختلفة من المشاركين في الأحداث أو المتأثرين بها. تكون كل شهادة نصاً حرفياً لما قاله المتحدث خلال مقابلة مع الكاتبة سميث. من خلال أداء هذه الشهادات الدقيقة، تجسد سميث بدقة أصوات وعواطف الأشخاص الذين قابلتهم. تقدم لنا نظرة متعددة الجوانب وإنسانية عميقة حول أحداث كراون هايتس. إنها تسلط الضوء على المسائل الكامنة وراء التقسيمات العرقية والدينية مع التأكيد على أهمية التعاطف والتفاهم في أوقات الأزمات. تُظهر مسرحية "نيران في المرأة" كمسرحية حيّة كيف يمكن للسرد الأصيل من متحدثيه أن يربطنا عميقاً بالأحداث الواقعية. إنها تذكرنا بأن المسرح يمكن أن يكون أداة قوية لفهم تجارب الآخرين وزيادة الوعي بالقضايا المهمة. يجد قارئ الرواية نفسه أمام طرائق لغوية غير مألوفة، تظهر قصيدة الكاتب على إدراجها بشكل مُلفت للانتباه وكأنها رسالة ضمنية تحتاج إلى قراءة ما بين سطورها، وهذا هو هدف البحث الذي يسلط الضوء على ثلاثة محاور تم اختيار دراستها وتحليلها من أجل معرفة دوافع ظهورها في هذا النص الروائي؛ فالكاتبة تعمّدت تشظية اللغة في النص السردية فمثلاً يظهر السارد

مرة بالضمير (أنا) ومرة أخرى بالضمير (هو) الذي يعود على جورج، الشخصية الرئيسية، التأني مع أصحابه في غابات فلاندر.

المحور الثاني من البحث يتناول الاستخدام المتكرر لإسم الفاعل وعلاقة هذا الاستخدام مع تأثير الكتابة بالرسم والتصوير. وأما المحور الأخير فيتناول علامات الترقيم التي تختفي في بعض المواطن، مثل: الفارزة والنقطة وعلامات الاقتباس ولا سيما في الخطاب المباشر، أو تلك التي تتكرر، كالأقواس على سبيل المثال، في الكثير من المقاطع في داخل النص.

الكلمات الدالة: المسرح الحي، أعمال شغب كراون هايتس، السرد الأصيل من قائله، الأحداث التاريخية.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper explores "Fires in the Mirror", a play by Anna Deavere Smith that presents a verbatim account of the Crown Heights riots in Brooklyn, New York, 1991. The play weaves together the voices of real people affected by the riots, including victims, witnesses, community leaders, and public officials. Her play offers an intimate and thought-provoking look into the complexities of race, identity, and community in America. The play's title, "Fires in the Mirror", alludes to the widespread chaos and destruction during the riots, symbolizing the burning anger and deep-rooted conflicts that engulfed the neighborhood. Through a carefully crafted narrative, Smith weaves diverse voices and personal stories, offering audiences a glimpse into the human condition as it grapples with themes of prejudice, empathy, and the struggle for understanding. What sets this play apart is that the author did not invent any characters or conversations. Instead, she directly spoke with actual people who experienced the events, such as victims, witnesses, and leaders. Then, she skillfully portrayed their exact words on stage, bringing their stories to life as they had told them. The play goes beyond recording what happened and deepening human experiences, exploring themes like prejudice, empathy, and the quest for understanding. *Fires in the Mirror* makes the audience face complex realities and encourages us to consider different viewpoints that shape how we see history and the world today.

“Fires in the Mirror” is a powerful and moving play that forces us to confront uncomfortable truths about race and social justice. It is a testament to the power of art to engage audiences in vital conversations about the human experience.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Verbatim theatre is a unique form of performance that utilizes interviews or other documentary materials to engage audiences with urgent and controversial topics of general or local interest. (Forsyth & Megson, 2009) This style of theatre aims to reflect undistorted reality while providing an intense theatrical experience (Muresan, 2019). Anna Deavere Smith, a prominent figure in verbatim theatre, is known for her performance in "Fire in the Mirror," which has been praised for its technical virtuosity and brilliant portrayal of characters (Martin & Smith, 1993) . Smith's work is considered more documentary than artistic in the traditional sense, highlighting the importance of authenticity and realism in verbatim theatre (Martin & Smith, 1993) . In the realm of theatre, the use of documentary materials has become increasingly prevalent. Works like David Hare's "The Permanent Way" have incorporated interviews with individuals connected to specific events, providing a unique perspective on real-life experiences (Merlin, 2007). Similarly, verbatim theatre has been used to shed light on important social issues, with directors and playwrights like Moisés Kaufman and Alecky Blythe utilizing this approach to create impactful performances (Muresan, 2019) . While the focus of verbatim theatre is on presenting reality without distortion, the genre also allows for creative storytelling and the creation of immersive story worlds on stage (Maguire, 2015) . By drawing on a range of storytelling performances, commonalities and distinctions in the creation of these worlds can be identified, showcasing the diverse approaches taken by different artists in the field of verbatim theatre (Maguire, 2015)& (Humphery-Smith, 1989) . Verbatim theatre, as exemplified by Anna Deavere Smith's work and the broader landscape of documentary theatre, offers a powerful platform for exploring real-world issues and engaging audiences in meaningful conversations. (Chowdary et al., 2018) & (Harlow, 2011) Through the use of authentic materials and a commitment to reflecting reality, verbatim theatre continues to be a vital and impactful form of artistic expression (Muresan, 2019) .

3. METHODOLOGY: VERBATIM THEATER

According to Abdullah and Khalaf (2016) :

Verbatim theatre can be then defined as a form of documentary theatre which constructs the plays from the specific expressions spoken by people talked about an exacting event or topic.(P.4)

Any translation, in tis sense, in the theatre is "likely to be viewed as small and secondary and surely never as excellent as the "original," according to Hutcheon (2006). Adaptations have been criticised in scholarly critiques and media reviews using terms like "tampering," "violation," "interference," "betrayal," and "infidelity" (Hutcheon 2006). Do concerns about equivalency in the context of translations in verbatim theatre need to be addressed? Is it possible for a verbatim theatre translation to try to be as accurate as the original? The answer to this question is almost yes since it is a tool for addressing real problems in the societies and trying to find solutions to them. (McCormack , 2018, P. 13)

In the book *Verbatim Theatre: Oral History and Documentary Techniques* by Will Hammond and Dan Steward, it is possible to find that verbatim theatre can be explored as a form of documentary theatre that relies on real-life events taken from interviews with real people. The authors conduct a practical study to create verbatim theatre, which includes conducting interviews, transcribing interviews, and extensive research (Hammond and Stewart, 2014, P. 70).

Similarly, in *The Laramie Project*, verbatim theatre documents the effects of the murder of a gay college student, Matthew Shepard, in 1998, who was fatally beaten in Laramie, Wyoming. The play relies primarily on interviews with Laramie citizens, specifically Shepard's family, friends, and people involved in his murder trial. Using the verbatim texts of these interviews produces a powerful image that reflects the reality of a society dominated by struggles between hate, acceptance, and violence.

In their book *Verbatim Theatre: Oral History and Documentary Techniques*, (2014) Dan Steward and Will Hammond studied verbatim theatre in political and social contexts. They discussed how this form of theatre could be used to document the

experiences of refugees, as seen in their work *Asylum Monologues*, which is based on a series of interviews with refugees and asylum seekers in the UK.

Similarly, in the play "Katrina: The Waves," which is based on a series of interviews with survivors of Hurricane Katrina, they explored how verbatim theatre can be used to examine various issues related to natural disasters (Hammond and Steward, 2014, Pp. 57-59).

Hammond and Steward argue that verbatim theatre effectively gives voice to individuals whose stories might otherwise be lost. By using the words of these individuals verbatim, verbatim theatre can achieve a level of emotional resonance and authenticity that other forms of theatre cannot. In addition, it can preserve individuals' unique perspectives and experiences initially and powerfully and bring their voices to a broader audience (Hammond and Steward, 2014, P. 5). In *My Name is Rachel Corrie*, verbatim texts in the play allowed the audience to glimpse Corrie's thoughts, motivations, and emotions as she worked to spread justice and peace in the Middle East. The play sheds light on the experiences of activists working towards these goals while adding a human element to the conflict in the Middle East.

In Alicia Smith Howard's article, "Performing the Verbatim Self: Anna Deavere Smith's *Fires in the Mirror*," she discusses how Smith used verbatim theatre in her play to shed light on the 1991 Crown Heights riots, which were the result of tensions between the Jewish and Black communities in Brooklyn, New York. Howard argues that Smith could bring authentic voices to her work through this technique, giving them power and agency.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1. Anna Deavere Smith's Biography

Anna Deavere Smith is a multi-talented American artist who has significantly contributed to theater, acting, education, and journalism. She is best known for her one-woman plays, which explore social issues connected to current events (Craine, 2022, P. 1).

She was born in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1950. She grew up in a racially segregated area but displayed an early talent for mimicry. She studied linguistics at Beaver College and later pursued acting at the American Conservatory Theatre. After graduating, she taught drama at Carnegie Mellon University, the University of Southern

California, and Stanford University. In 1992, Smith's play "Fires in the Mirror, "Crown Heights, Brooklyn, and Other Identities" was a breakthrough. The play delved into the racial tensions in Brooklyn's Crown Heights neighborhood after an incident in 1991. Based on extensive interviews conducted by Smith herself, the play earned high praise and was a Pulitzer Prize finalist (Craine, 2022, P. 2).

Smith's other notable works include "Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992" (1993), which examined the violence following the Rodney King case, and "Let Me Down Easy" (2008), which explored human vulnerability and current events.

In addition to her work in theater, she has also appeared on television and in film. She has starred in the TV shows "Nurse Jackie," "The West Wing," and "Black-ish," and she has appeared in the movies "Dave," "Rachel Getting Married," and "Flora & Ulysses."(3).

Smith's literary works include "Talk to Me: Travels in Media and Politics" (2000) and "Letters to a Young Artist" (2006). Smith's contributions to the arts and society have been recognized with numerous honors, including a MacArthur Foundation fellowship in 1996 and the National Humanities Medal in 2013 (4).

4.2. A Captivating Verbatim Account of Historical Events in "Fires in The Mirror"

Through a series of monologues, one of which is performed by Anna Smith, a black woman who grew up in Crown Heights in 1933, Smith reflects on her own experiences of bias and racism and how these factors continue to impact her life decades later. She says, "I was born in 1933 and raised in Crown Heights. Crown Heights was always alive with disturbances" (Smith,2015,P. 48).

She resides in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, the setting that inspired her monologue play "Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn, and Other Identities." It is also where she was born and raised in 1933 and where her monologue reflects the majority black population and a sizeable Jewish community.

Smith's many experiences with discrimination, racism, poverty, and crime in Crown Heights dominate her thinking in her work. Despite her challenges, she became a successful businesswoman and community activist. The play is considered by theater critic Ben Brantley to be "among the most compassionate and convincing works of theater you are likely to see at any time" and "a forceful reminder of the difficult issues that constitute American society: justice, community, and identity" (Brantley,1992,P. 1).

Graeber views the play's performance power and ability to explore issues as creating discussion and deep thought among its audience. The play revolves around the events in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, in 1991, following the incident in which a car driven by a Hasidic Jew mounted the sidewalk and killed a seven-year-old black boy named Gavin Cato, who was playing on the sidewalk. The incident sparked tensions between the Jewish and black communities and the Orthodox community, leading to violent clashes and riots. (Graeber, 2001,P. 6)

These events included vandalism and assaults, as well as deliberate arson, which led to the death of Orthodox Jewish scholar Yankel Rosenbaum at the hands of a group of black teenagers who stabbed him, as well as the death of an Italian-American man named Anthony Graziosi, who was beaten to death by a group of black men. These riots attracted local media attention and sparked intense discussions about race issues in America. (Associated Press .n. p.)

In response to these events, Smith conducted sequential interviews with individuals with unique perspectives on the current situation or who had been affected by the riots. These interviews formed the basis for the monologues in “Fires in the Mirror”.(Smith, 2015,Pp. 1-2) Smith brought these stories to life on stage using a unique documentary theater style. To create her play, she conducted over 50 interviews with various individuals, including politicians, community leaders, witnesses, and black and Jewish victims. She then transformed each interview into a monologue that showcased each person's unique behavior and words. The result is a collection of monologues that reflect the conflicting emotions and diverse perspectives that emerged due to the Crown Heights riots. It focuses on those who were violence victims or lost loved ones and the trauma and pain they experienced. It also highlights the societal issues that played a significant role in the riots, such as political polarization, economic inequality, and systemic racism. The author selected a speech by Queen Margaret from Shakespeare's play Richard III.

The Queen says to the Duchess of York: From forth the kennel of thy womb hath crept A hell-hound that doth hunt us all to death, That dog that had its teeth before his eyes. To worry lambs and lap their gentle blood. That foul defacer of God's handiwork, That excellent

**grand tyrant of the earth. That reigns in galled eyes of weeping souls.
Thy womb let loose to chase us to our graves(Smith, 2015,P. 21).**

She refers that she followed Juanita's instructions and repeated the fourteen lines from Queen Margaret's speech many times, even late into the night. She did not know much about Queen Margaret or Shakespeare back then, but her words were powerful, and they created vivid pictures in her mind. It was as if she was transported to a dark and decadent world in a very short time. The words themselves had a powerful effect on her. She did not control the words but let them flow through her. She soon realized the power of using rhythm and imagery to bring out the spirit of a character, a play, or a specific time. In this work, Smith challenges the audience to see the human faces behind the headlines and confront these issues head-on. Overall, this play is considered a powerful work that calls for thought-provoking discussions about identity and race in America.

4.3. Analysis of *Fires in The Mirror*

In the book *Verbatim Theatre: Oral History and Documentary Techniques* by Will Hammond and Dan Stewart, it is possible to find that verbatim theatre can be explored as a form of documentary theatre that relies on real-life events taken from interviews with real people. The authors conduct a practical study to create verbatim theatre, which includes conducting interviews, transcribing interviews, and extensive research (Hammond,2014,P. 70).

Similarly, in the book, "The Laramie Project", verbatim theatre documents the effects of the murder of a gay college student, Matthew Shepard, in 1998, who was fatally beaten in Laramie, Wyoming. The play relies primarily on interviews with Laramie citizens, specifically Shepard's family, friends, and people involved in his murder trial. Using the verbatim texts of these interviews produces a powerful image that reflects the reality of a society dominated by struggles between hate, acceptance, and violence.

The same applies to *My Name is Rachel*. Verbatim theatre narrates the story of American activist Rachel Corrie, who was killed by an Israeli bulldozer in 2003 for protesting the destruction of Palestinian homes. The play is based on interviews with Corrie's family and some of her friends, in addition to her emails, journals, and written messages. The

verbatim texts of this play were based on "verbatim transcripts" created to embody and create a deeply personal and emotional image of Rachel Corrie's life and activities.

In their book *Verbatim Theatre: Oral History and Documentary Techniques*, Dan Stewart and Will Hammond studied verbatim theatre in political and social contexts. They discussed how this form of theatre could be used to document the experiences of refugees, as seen in their work *Asylum Monologues*, which is based on a series of interviews with refugees and asylum seekers in the UK. In *Verbatim Theatre: Oral History and Documentary Techniques*, the authors explore the wide-ranging uses of verbatim theatre in both political and social contexts. They highlight the powerful ability of verbatim theatre to document real-life events and give voice to groups that might not otherwise be heard. The book emphasizes the great potential of verbatim theatre to tell meaningful stories and bring attention to issues that might otherwise be overlooked (Dolan, 2009, P.7).

Similarly, in the play *Katrina: The Waves*, which is based on a series of interviews with survivors of Hurricane Katrina, they explored how verbatim theatre can be used to examine various issues related to natural disasters (Hammond and Stewart, 2014, Pp. 57-59). They argue that verbatim theatre effectively gives voice to individuals whose stories might otherwise be lost. By using the words of these individuals verbatim, verbatim theatre can achieve a level of emotional resonance and authenticity that other forms of theatre cannot. In addition, it can preserve individuals' unique perspectives and experiences initially and powerfully and bring their voices to a broader audience (Hammond and Stewart, 2014, P. 5).

In *My Name is Rachel Corrie*, verbatim texts in the play allowed the audience to glimpse Corrie's thoughts, motivations, and emotions as she worked to spread justice and peace in the Middle East. The play shed light on the experiences of activists working towards these goals while adding a human element to the conflict in the Middle East.

Smith's *Fires in the Mirror* discusses how Smith used verbatim theatre in her play to shed light on the 1991 Crown Heights riots, which resulted from tensions between the Jewish and Black communities in Brooklyn, New York. Howard argues that Smith could bring authentic voices to her work through this technique, giving them power and agency. Smith plays different people involved in the Crown Heights events. One of the characters

she portrays is Angela Davis, who is both an activist and a scholar. Through Davis' character, Smith helps us understand the racial and social aspects of the conflict in Crown Heights. Smith states:

Morning. Spring. Oakland, California. This interview was done on the phone with myself and Thulani Davis. Thulani and I were calling from an office at the Public Theatre. We need to find out precisely what Angela was doing or wearing. From what she said, I believe she was sitting on her deck in her home, which overlooks a beautiful panorama of trees (Smith,2015,P. 77).

By acting as Davis and sharing her words and experiences on stage, Smith adds to the play's overall portrayal of the community and the present tensions.

Of course, "race" was synonymous with community for many years in African American history. Many of our predecessors considered themselves "race women" and "race men." Billie Holiday, for example, called herself a "race woman," indicating that she was opposed to racism and supported the Black community. As a child growing up in the South, I assumed that if anybody in the community came under attack, then it was my responsibility to be there to support that person, to support the "race." (Smith,2015,P. 78)

Smith presents Davis's words that she indicates in African American history that the term "race" often represented the community itself. People identified as "race women" or "race men" to show their opposition to racism and support for the Black community. For the author, growing up in the South meant they had a sense of responsibility to support anyone in the community who faced challenges or attacks. Hence, Smith can produce precise, multi-faceted images of the community and its tensions.

Howard asserts that through verbatim theatre, Smith could give voice to different societal perspectives and avoid simplifying the issues at hand. In this way, the play succeeded in accurately representing the complexities of the conflict and avoiding reductionist narratives (Dolan, 2009, 1-25; 51-62; 123-148).

Smith also portrays Carmel Cato, a character based on a natural person who endured the heartbreaking loss of his young son during the Crown Heights events. Through Cato's monologue, Smith delves into the immense sorrow and pain that a grieving father goes through, offering a deeply personal and emotional viewpoint within the play. In addition to all of this, Smith Howard discusses that Verbatim theater was able to take a challenging stance toward the traditional concepts of authorship and acting. It was achieved by allowing theatrical characters the freedom to express themselves, allowing them to disclose their own experiences and personal stories without filtering those experiences through a single translator or author's lens. This approach sheds light on society's diversity and complexity and makes events more accurately understood (Dolan, 2009, P. 123).

“Fires in the Mirror” as an example, Cantrell discusses how Smith's use of verbatim interviews allowed her to create an "authentic performance" by using the actual experiences and words of the individuals involved in the Crown Heights events. It adds credibility and authenticity to the play, as the experiences and words are those of real people. (4)

Cantrell notes that Carmel Cato's monologue in “Fires in the Mirror” exemplifies how authenticity can be captured in verbatim theatre. Carmel Cato is the father of Gavin Cato, whose death is a significant event in the play. In the play, we see Carmel Cato expressing his grief and pain at the loss of his son, using words that were taken directly from Smith's interviews with him. This use of verbatim material allowed Smith to portray Carmel Cato's experiences and emotions authentically, allowing the audience to see and feel these emotions directly (5)

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, "Fires in the Mirror" by Anna Deavere Smith offers a captivating verbatim account of historical events that resonates with its audience on both an intellectual and emotional level. Through the innovative use of multiple perspectives and personal testimonies, Smith brilliantly captures the complexity and multifaceted nature of the Crown Heights riots in 1991.

By presenting a diverse range of voices and experiences, Smith reveals the deep-rooted tensions, racial divisions, and cultural clashes that fueled the events in Crown Heights. The verbatim accounts provide an authentic representation of the individuals involved, highlighting their personal struggles, fears, and desires. This approach allows the readers or viewers to engage with the material on a deeply human level, fostering empathy and understanding. Moreover, "Fires in the Mirror" transcends the specific historical context of the Crown Heights riots and becomes a powerful exploration of identity, race, and community. Smith's meticulous research and attention to detail create a rich tapestry of narratives that challenges preconceived notions and societal assumptions. Through the verbatim accounts, she encourages critical reflection and a reevaluation of our own biases and prejudices.

The verbatim format employed in "Fires in the Mirror" serves as a powerful tool for social commentary and cultural critique. By presenting the words of real people directly and without interpretation, Smith invites the audience to confront uncomfortable truths and engage in a dialogue about the complex issues at hand. The verbatim accounts provide an unfiltered glimpse into the lived experiences of those directly impacted by the events, amplifying their voices and validating their stories.

In this way, "Fires in the Mirror" not only serves as a historical record but also as a catalyst for meaningful conversations and social change. By shedding light on the profound impact of historical events and the lasting legacies they leave behind, Smith's work prompts us to confront our collective history and work towards a more inclusive and equitable future.

Finally, "Fires in the Mirror" stands as a remarkable example of the power of verbatim theater, capturing the essence of historical events and offering a platform for marginalized voices to be heard. Through its captivating portrayal of the Crown Heights riots, it compels us to reflect on our own roles in shaping society and encourages us to strive for a more just and compassionate world.

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