Ashis Sengupta, ed. *Islam in Performance: Contemporary Plays from South Asia*. London and New York: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2017. ix+351 pp. ISBN 978-1-4742-5070-2.

Islam in Performance, a collection of six contemporary plays from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, is an important addition to the existing scholarship on South Asian theatre. As a standalone work, it attempts to delineate the theatrical representation of the politicisation of Islam and the formation of the "Muslim" subjectivity in South Asia. In addition, it can be seen as a companion volume to Sengupta's *Mapping South Asia through Contemporary Theatre* (2014) in the sense that it continues to focus on the contemporary landmark works of political theatre from the same geopolitical region. Of the six plays, *At the Sound of Marching Feet* (1976) and *Life of Araj* (2001) are translated from Bengali; *The Far-reaching Night* (2006), *We Shall Resist* (2009) and *Watch the Show and Move on* (1992) are from Urdu and *The Djinns of Eidgah* (2012) is originally in English. Therefore, we have a collection not only of vernacular plays but also a sample of the Indian drama in English – a genre initially criticised for its limited linguistic registers and urbanity but increasingly respected for its subversive politics. Sengupta also qualifies the sense of the "contemporary" by including plays written at different times in the past four decades. *At the Sound of Marching Feet/Payer Awaj,* for example, was first staged in 1976 but recently revived during the Shahbag demonstrations in Dhaka. This resurrection points to the crucial fact that the 1947 partition of India has never receded into history. Instead, it has become a perpetually present symbol for the politicisation of religion and ethnic cleansing.

The book opens with a long and structured introduction by the editor. Islam has many long traditions of exegesis, he reminds the reader, and as a result, many versions of Islam are practised by different sects. Before the independence of India, Islam came to be politicised and was used to wrest Pakistan from other religious communities of India. However, Pakistan's future was to be shaped by a determined drive to establish a monolithic Islam and lend it the power that properly belongs to the state. As the fundamentalist interpretations of Islam gained legitimacy and state power, minority Islamic sects such as the *hazara*s and the *ahmadiya*s came to be oppressed. A series of strict religious laws such as the *Hudud* and the Blasphemy Law, aiming to restrict the liberal rights of the individual, were passed. Such a powerful and established state religion inhibits any fresh interpretations of the texts it holds sacred. Any such attempt runs the risk of being subjected to the *fatwa* of so-called religious leaders. Salman Rushdie spent many years in hiding and in the recent past was unable to attend a literary meet in an avowedly secular country like India which tries to steer clear (though not always successfully) of any controversy that can hurt a community's sentiment and foment trouble. As Sengupta has pointed out (17), Pakistan has

used its education system as an ideological apparatus to discipline its citizens. With Zia ul Haq's patronisation of the Deobandi tradition, which immediately clashed with other Islamic traditions, the Sunni brand of Islam set up a network of madrasas across Pakistan. As a result, the minds that can see otherwise and challenge the state-sponsored narratives are disappearing as time passes. Political theatre in the form of street plays has had a redeeming role in this scenario. Just as the excesses of the ideology of *Hindutva* have been resisted by the leftist and women's movements in India, the oppressive state-clergy nexus in Pakistan is resisted by similar groups. A culture of resistance has managed to hold on, and theatre groups such as Tehrik-e-Niswan, Ajoka, and Natak have powerfully debated what it means to be a "true" Muslim.

In the "plays from Bangladesh" section, *At the Sound of the Marching Feet*, written and translated from Bengali by Syed Shamsul Haq, records a crucial moment in the cultural history of Pakistan. A state-sponsored monolithic Islam bent on imposing cultural homogeneity over the Eastern wing of Pakistan takes its last breath as the distant rumble of approaching Bengali nationalism could be heard. The village headman who had supported Pakistani "Islamic" nationalism is killed by the villagers even before the fighters of the liberation force arrive. The debate on the importance of learning classical languages such as Arabic and Persian in the formation of a "proper" Muslim identity is still alive in Bangladesh. The language contention resurfaces in the next play *Life of Araj,* which shows the victimisation of a village teacher who refused to teach Arabic and Persian in his rural school, disregarding the religious leaders. The play perceives the crisis as a scientific reason-versus-regressive values issue, in a way uncannily similar to Krishna Mohan Banerjea's *The Persecuted, or Dramatic Scenes Illustrative of the Present State of Hindoo Society in Calcutta* (1831). The secular Bengali nationalism in this play comes perilously close to the Western narratives of scientific modernity and the journey of cultures from regressive to more "advanced" stages. The future Bangladesh will most probably create "their modernity," retaining many cultural and religious elements – a "fusion of Bengali culture and humanist Islam" that might be unpalatable to believers of a pure secularism.

The selected plays from India, Abhishek Majumdar's *The Djinns of Eidgah* (first staged at the Royal Court Theatre, London) and Zahida Zaidi's *The Far-reaching Night/Bahut Door Tak Rat Hogi,* belong to a powerful tradition of resistance beginning from the IPTA and running alongside the rise of *Hindutva* in India. They derive sustenance from the ongoing struggle waged by women and the leftist activists in the long nineties, which had been a fermenting period for new ideas, identities and movements. Professor Zaidi, closely associated with the National School of Drama, New Delhi, believed in the powerful transmission of a message without any regular theatrical paraphernalia. *The Djinns*, an Indian English play meant for an urban audience, is more sophisticated in the treatment of its subject, employing an innovative narrative technique borrowed from

Islamic "dastaan" story-telling. However, both *The Djinns* and *Far-reaching Night* share the hallmark of the long nineties: the intense scrutiny of discourses and a disclosure of the constructed nature of the "dastaan"s or stories people believe and take part in. *The Djinns* deal with the Kashmir issue, the "unfinished business of Partition." Since the present BJP government came to power in India, the situation in Kashmir has aggravated. After the death of Burhan Wani, the Indian army has been at the receiving end of relentless stone-throwing by Kashmiri youths. They have retaliated by using AFSPA (Armed Forces Special Powers Act) in a heavy-handed manner. The djinns in this play, painted in gold and green, are visualised as the incarnations of irrational wrath and blind violence. Bilal, a young footballer who wishes to keep away from the anti-India stone-throwing rallies, falls into the vortex of blind rage once he discovers the mutilated corpses of his team members. A stressed soldier who cannot take the pressure of his job kills Dr. Baig, who intended to participate in the peacekeeping talks and bring back normalcy. There is no end to this cycle of violence, as people belonging to different imagined communities cannot find a meaning in other stories.

Zaidi's *The Far-reaching Night* is a journal of the Gujarat riots of 2002 after the Godhra train burning incident. The play openly puts the blame on conspiring and rabble-rousing political leaders and conniving administrators. It powerfully delivers the simple message to the audience that all riots are staged to gain political mileage. The play has never been staged, possibly because it has two conniving characters called Rathvani and Todi – who closely resemble L.K. Advani and Narendra Modi. To situate the play in its context, the editor has painstakingly traced the history of such manipulations in the postcolonial nation. 1983 saw Indira Gandhi's appeal to Hindu voters in the Jammu and Kashmir assembly elections, while her making and unmaking of Bhindranwale as a political tool has left a permanent scar of the 1984 anti-Sikh riots. Rajiv Gandhi's failure in the nineties to stand up to the secular ideals adopted in the constitution during the Shah Bano talaq case has effectively undermined the secular spirit of the Indian constitution. The Bharatiya Janata Party started adopting such tactics in the nineties, starting with Advani's Rath Yatra to stoke Hindu "pride." The Ram Janambhoomi-Babri Masjid crisis led to multiple riots across the subcontinent and considerable political mileage for the party. In her play, Zaidi depicts how in times of heightened community consciousness, people cease to be seen as people. They become symbols – figures in saffron dhotis or green kurtas – each the enemy of the other. Instead of the "clichéd frame of communalism," the editor has used Mark Juergensmeyer's term "religious nationalism" to describe this ethnocentric segmentation. However, we might still need a better critical vocabulary, as both "communalism" and "religious nationalism" presume a standard, Western, secular "nationalism" against which Oriental nationalisms are read (if one just visualises the marigold flowers, conch shells and brass utensils on the cover of Juergensmeyer's book) as peculiarities, if not aberrations. Neither

term would be used to describe any movement in the West (Juergensmeyer examines the cases of the Middle East, South Asia and formerly Marxist states). Moreover, both the terms are obviously linked with (blind) violence which is the "natural" domain the West reserves for non-Western cultures.

The two plays from Pakistan, *We shall Resist* by Anwer Jafri and *Watch the Show and Move on* by Shahid Nadeem are remarkable in their effort to break the glass wall between the actors and the audience. Sometimes this theatre savagely attacks the audience's sense of security inside the auditorium (particularly in *Watch the Show*) which becomes an unbearably true image of the fragile democracy of Pakistan. *We Shall Resist* can well be an uninitiated viewer's guide to the political history of Pakistan. It begins with Jinnah's independence speech on the radio which unbelievably assures a post-religious secular space for all citizens in the new nation carved out on religious grounds. Disillusionment follows as corruption in all rungs of administration thwarts the honest elderly officer in the play. Next we have a tableau of characters representing different periods in Pakistan's history from General Ayub Khan's era to Bangladesh war, Bhutto's tenure, the total radicalisation in Zia ul Haq's period (a character thanks him for Islamising the previously neutral space of the government offices: employees can now conveniently pray inside their offices instead of going out to mosques), and the rise of General Musharraf after Zia's dubious death. Next, an episode shows how in such a radicalised situation even a loan repayment can be avoided by accusing the lender of blasphemy – especially if he belongs to a minority sect such as the *ahmadiya*. He will be subjected to the wrath of not only faceless mobs but also the state authority. Maulvi, the religious head and Chaudhry, the administrator, are two characters in connivance, and one issues a *fatwa* whenever the other needs to exploit people – Christians, minority sects and even Sunni individuals. This abuse of religion can effectively paralyse the democratic impulse that the nation still preserved after Partition. *Watch the Show* more clearly talks about the contemporary sectarian violence that becomes the fate of Pakistan as faceless black men interpret the war between right and wrong as a war between Islam and non-Islam, disciplining and holding the common citizen in an open prison.

The translators have done a commendable job, retaining the resilience of the plays in the target language. The end-notes assume a reader unfamiliar with South Asian cultures and provide keys even to words such as *hanuman* and *shukriya*.

Sengupta's pet project – reading theatre beyond the nation and in terms of the geopolitics of South Asia – was successfully initiated in his earlier book *Mapping South Asia*. This collection securely establishes this approach, crossing borders with the common issue of political Islam. However, it has reverted to a focus on the Indian subcontinent – a position from which the earlier work had departed. Any kind of cartography has to draw borders and boundaries, setting a limit to the region of inclusion. In his introduction, Sengupta has mentioned in

passing the Buddhist violence against minorities in Myanmar – a South (east) Asian country. Obviously, this cartography rules out the problem of Bengali-speaking Arakanese Rohingya Muslims of Myanmar-Bangladesh border, who are denied any rights and routinely persecuted. *I am Rohingya* (2016), a play in four acts staged by the Rohingya Youth Voices community represents how Bangladesh has been hostile to Rohingya refugees who speak the same language and belong to the same religious and ethnic communities.

However, this volume is successful in drawing attention to the fact that nation-building and "Muslim" identity formation are still unfinished processes in South Asia. More importantly, the book attempts to write this history through an exploration of subcontinental theatre – a genre that remains a niche area inside the corpus of Postcolonial literature. The editor has done a commendable job of successfully capturing the affective history of the cultural region through painstaking research and a well-planned arrangement of South Asian plays.

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