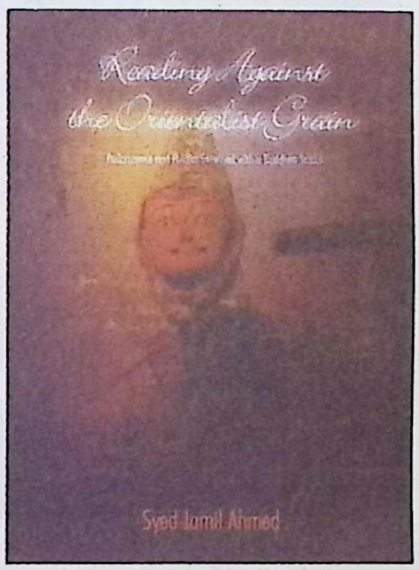
The Politics of Performance

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Reading Against the Orientalist Grain: Performance and Politics Entwined with a Buddhist Strain
by Syed Jamil Ahmed
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Reading Against the Orientalist Grain: Performance and Politics Entwined with a Buddhist Strain by Syed Jamil Ahmed is a collection of eight essays, which discuss performances from Nepal, Tibet, Sikkim, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Burma and Bangladesh. There are two essays on Nepal: one on Indra Jatra and the other on Carya Nrtya. The essay on Indra Jatra is the only one that does not discuss a performance of a Buddhist text, though the writer does suggest a link between Hinduism and Buddhism: the Buddha is considered a reincarnation of Visnu. The essay on Bauddha Kirtan in Bangladesh, while also that of a performance, appears different from the others, all of which are of performances marked by dance as well as music and song. However, like the other essays, it too analyses the performance in the context of the politics of power and religion.

What makes the book attractive is not only the analysis of the politics behind performance but also the details that the writer provides of the performance. Each of the performances described and analysed in the book comes to life as Ahmed describes the time, the performers, the audience, and then discusses it in the context of political history of the country. Vividly illustrated by photographs, most of which were taken by the author himself, the book enables the reader to share the writer's experience. As Ahmed points out, "Because a performance is also transient, the eight performances discussed offered the author the experience as experiments and a form of knowledge of transience, and life as transience."

Syed Jamil Ahmed is a rare breed: an active theatre personality who is at the same time a scholar. Anyone fortunate enough to have seen his performances Doctor Faustus, Bishad Sindhu, and Behular Bhasan, for example knows the vibrancy that the director in him inspires in each production. He is, at the same time, a serious scholar. His five other books, in Bangla and English, are testimony enough. It is perhaps this combination that makes his latest book, Reading Against the Orientalist Grain, difficult reading for the casual reader who is interested in theatre but not in theory. References to Barthes, Said, and Foucault are scattered throughout the book. In fact, Said's presence is manifested in the very title of the book; Barthes becomes part of the title of the chapter on Indra Jatra in Nepal; and the questions of power discussed by Foucault seem to permeate the chapters with the politics of power inextricably entwined in every performance discussed in the book.

However, the book is not a dull explication of theory with examples from theatre because, throughout the book, the reader becomes aware that any performance is a performance in time with actors and audiences, those involved in the performance and those on the margins of it. And always, the reader is made aware of the presence of the writer, as audience as well as in his "post-colonial location" as he puts it. Every experience, Ahmed stresses, is his experience and the book is the product of and attempt to communicate his experience of Buddhist performances.

But it is perhaps in those moments when the writer appears in his own person briefly shedding the multiple identity that he has proclaimed of himself in his Introduction that make the book a personal journal as well. In the Postcript to "When a People Do Not Need to Remember," an account of the writer's experience of a Pangtoed Cham performance in Sikkim, centred upon the god Kanchenjunga, who appears in the person of a dancer, the writer describes his disappointment at not having been able to see the Kanchenjunga mountain because of the rain. And then, just as he is leaving in a jeep, he turns back and sees the mountain. It is almost an epiphanic moment: "But my heart leapt. For suddenly there he was, resplendent in sunshine, majestic and radiant! I could not believe my eyes. I had wanted to see him all through my weeklong stay but he had evaded me. And suddenly, there he stood, bathed in gold against a sky that could not have been more blue. I was spellbound by his exalted splendour glowing in nonchalant solemnity, as if I were in the very presence of God"

Reading Against the Orientalist Grain is not for the casual reader. But for serious readers, theatre activists, actors, directors, Buddhist scholars, cultural historians, social anthropologists and yes, even government agencies, which permit or manipulate public performances, the book is rewarding reading.

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