

توثيق العنصرية في رواية آنا ديفير سميث

"الحرائق في المرأة: كراون هايتس وبروكلين وهويات أخرى"

**Documenting Racism in Anna Deavere Smith's Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn and Other Identities**

**Dr. Elaff Ganim Salih**

د. إيلاف غانم صالح

**Lecturer**

مدرس

**University of Anbar**

**College of Education for Girls**

جامعة الانبار - كلية التربية للبنات

**Dr. Mohamad Fleih Hassan**

د. محمد فليح حسن

**Assistant professor**

أستاذ مساعد

**University of Anbar- College**

**of Arts**

جامعة الانبار - كلية الآداب

[elaf1977@uoanbar.edu.iq](mailto:elaf1977@uoanbar.edu.iq)

[mohamedfleih@uoanbar.edu.iq](mailto:mohamedfleih@uoanbar.edu.iq)

الكلمات المفتاحية: شغب كراون هايتس، آنا د. سميث، العنصرية، حرائق في المرأة

**Keywords: Crown Heights riot, Anna D. Smith, racism, Fires in the Mirror**

**الملخص**

يبحث هذا المقال في توثيق العنصرية في فيلم "حرائق في المرأة" (١٩٩٢) للمخرجة آنا ديفير سميث، وهي دراما فردية تتحدث عن أعمال الشغب التي حدثت في كراون هايتس، في بروكلين في أغسطس ١٩٩١ وما تلاها. يتم سرد المسرحية من خلال وجهات النظر الأمريكية الأفريقية ووجهات النظر اليهودية من قبل الأشخاص المرتبطين بشكل مباشر وغير مباشر بتلك الاضطرابات. وتستكشف الدراسة الجذور التاريخية لما حدث في كراون هايتس من خلال توثيق الأعمال العنصرية التي مارسها كل من السود واليهود في بروكلين. تقدم الدراسة فهماً أفضل لهذا الحدث التاريخي وتسلط الضوء على الأسباب الحقيقية وراء هذا العمل العنيف.

### Abstract

This article investigates the documentation of racism in Anna Deavere Smith's *Fires in the Mirror* (1992), which is a one-person drama that talks about the Crown Heights riot, happened in Brooklyn in August 1991 and its aftermath. The play is told through the African-American and Jewish perspectives by the people who are attached directly and indirectly to the unrest. The study explores the historical roots for what happened in Crown Heights through documenting the racist acts exercised by both the blacks and Jews in Brooklyn. The study introduces a better understanding for this historical event highlighting the real reasons behind this act of violence.

## Introduction

Anna Deavere Smith (1950- ) is an American playwright and an actor. She has received numerous awards and honors for her contributions to the arts and social commentary. She has been a professor at institutions such as Stanford University and New York University's Tisch School of the Arts, imparting her knowledge and innovative techniques to aspiring performers and playwrights. Her works address social and political issues. She was born in Baltimore, Maryland. She is known for her theatrical performances and unique form of documentary-style theater, where she interviews real people extensively, transcribing their words verbatim, and embodying those people on stage through her performances. This technique helps her to highlight various perspectives on a particular issue or event and presents a wide range of voices and experiences.

Racism is still on-going controversial issue in the existing literature. Many various studies dealt with the concept of racism and racist attitudes reflected in the different genres of English literature. One of these examples is an article written by Ahmed and Kadhim entitled "The Concept of Racism in Morrison's "Sula" (2016). It is a thematic study to the text selected. Another study by Taha and Ibrahim entitled "The Double Faced Ideology: Antifeminism and Racism in Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eyes" (2020) deals with the nature of racial inequality in Morrison's The Bluest Eye and examines the interconnection between racism and femininity. Hamdan and Hamid dealt with racism in their article, "Representations of Racism in Children of Blood and Bone by Tomi Adeyemi (2023). The article examines the different aspects of racism in the selected novel in light of Delgado and Jean Stefancic's Critical Race Theory. However, the current study deals with Smith's documentary techniques in her Fires in the Mirror.

Smith's most famous work is *Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn, and Other Identities*, performed in 1992. In this play, she portrays multiple characters based on her interviews, highlighting the complexities of racial tensions and the Crown Heights riot of 1991. It is a documentary-style play theatricalized to address issues of race, ethnicity, and anti-Semitism in general and the Crown Heights riot in particular. The title of the play alludes to the idea of viewing the events and issues through the lens of media, reflection, and perspective. (Hellman, 2013,1)

The Crown Heights riot was triggered by a racial event that took place between African American and Jewish people. The reason for this riot was a car accident in which a Hasidic Jewish driver struck and killed a young African American boy, Gavin Cato. This accident caused the tensions that had already existed in the community due to longstanding conflicts.

## Discussion

Fires in the Mirror explores the perspectives and experiences of various individuals affected by and involved in the events surrounding the riot. Lyons and Lyons said that one of Smith's techniques of documenting racism is when she "does employ one of the principal conventions of dramatic writing, the use of direct narration to build an image of the past as that image directly informs the present" (44). Smith, the playwright, embodies and portrays a multitude of characters, including both African American and Jewish community members, allowing the audience to gain insight into their perspectives and the underlying racial tensions that fueled the violence.

The play sheds light on issues of racism, systemic inequalities, cultural clashes, and the complexities of racial relations in America. It emphasizes the importance of understanding multiple viewpoints to address and combat racism effectively. By presenting a diverse range of voices, the play challenges the audience to reflect on the deep-rooted issues and prejudices that lead to events like the Crown Heights riot.

The writer interviewed different kinds of people: political celebrities, religious leaders, intellectuals, and laypeople, with the intention that the play is performed by a single person—herself. The play consists of 29 monologues from 26 different people who search for meaning—especially concerning identity—in the midst of social unrest. Political celebrity Reverend Al Sharpton, author and social activist Letty Cottin Pogrebin, and Norman Rosenbaum—the brother of the slain Jewish man—are the only three characters with two different scenes. Within the play itself, Smith impersonates each of the characters, creating unity among the many voices of these hybrid interview-scenes:

Smith interviews a selection of participants, observers, and victims of the particular critical moment she addresses. The text

prepared for performance consists of segments of the interviews that she has recorded on tape. Smith builds the performance by appropriating language, inflection, and gesture from these encounters. She subtly interlaces segments from these individual discourses into a sequence. The intricately devised organization displays a range of predications, perceptions, and emotions. The resulting compound of statements provides the spectator with the sense that the performance confronts the social dynamics of the moment with some authenticity. (Lyons & Lyons, 43-44)

There was a tense racial tension between the Black people and Jewish community in Crown Heights. This tension highlights the danger of racist actions, which can create an environment of segregation and mutual lack of confidence between the different sects of the community based on their race and ethnicity, "This is about racism...This is about the tensions between Black people and Jews. This is about the fact that we're not welcome. You know, I mean, we're not welcome". This is a clear-cut proof for the existence of racist minds.

Another technique for the documentation of this racist incident is Smith's invisible voice. She detached herself from the characters she interviewed withholding any language of her own, relying exclusively upon the statements of others to fabricate a performance out of the real rather than the fictional (Lyons & Lyons, 46).

In the monologue of “Reuven Ostrov Pogroms”, the documentation of racism is seen in the phobia of being racially targeted as in the following lines:

And when this started to happen Crown  
Heights.  
It became painful  
and it felt like, like there was no place to go.  
It’s like you’re trapped,  
everywhere you go there’s Jew haters.

(p.131, L. 11-15)

The speaker talked about the horror and hardships experienced by his family in Russia as they had already run away from oppression and racism to experience again here another act of racist violence. This extreme nature of racism and hatred can provoke more hatred and revenge, especially by racist minds as in this statement, "You know, it's two days now. Jews, all Jews, all Jews should be killed". This shows that racists and extremists are blinded by their hatred to certain racial or ethnic group to act in a bloody way with concern to any human value. In another monologue, “Roslyn Malamud The Coup”, another face of racism is documented where the Blacks are targeted by a huge multitudes of policemen who terrorized the black citizens when the riot spread everywhere. They didn’t feel safe at their homes to the extent that they are imprisoned in their houses especially at night:

My Black neighbors?  
I mean I spoke to them.  
They were hiding in their houses just lie I was.  
We were scared.  
I was scared!  
I was really frightened.  
I had five hundred policemen standing in front of my  
house  
every day

(p.127, L. 1-8)

This statement reflects a traumatic experience shared by both the black people and Jewish as well. It showcases how racist actions can influence all the members of the society without sparing anyone whether Black, Jew, man or woman.

The same trauma that documents the racist attitudes experienced by the black people is reflected in the following lines:

No, no, no. I don't want to die. I don't want  
to die.  
I want my children to grow up  
and do the things that other children do.  
But you know what?  
You never know if your child is going to be  
stopped by a cop.

These lines show the profound scare and anxiety that racists instill in the black families and their daily worries about their kids not to return home because they can be easily suspected and murdered by policemen. It is a true documentation of the racial discrimination, especially against the Black people, who are an easy target for inspection by racists cops.

The black people faced double oppression as they were to take the blame for the riots of Crown Heights, "All the time the Jewish community is blamed for everything. Everything! There is no crime in Crown Heights. The blacks cannot get away with any crime in Crown Heights". They were scapegoated and blamed because of their ethnicity as secondary in the western thought. The play is a very good example for the failure of the social and legal system to diagnose the real reasons of the continuity of racist thought in the American society.



**Conclusion**

The study concludes that Smith's technique of performance in Crown Heights is intended to destabilize these essential identities represented as Blacks and Whites. It aims to demolish this binary opposition in her play Fires in the Mirror to rebel against racial stereotyping of identities. It concludes that Smith's presentation of different voices in her play challenges the audience to think deeply of these racial issues and prejudices that caused the riots of Crown Heights between the African-Americans and the Jews.

### References

- ❖ Ahmed, Mahmoud A. & Mohanad M. Kadhimi (2016). The Concept of Racism in Morrison's "Sula". Diyala Journal of Human Research. Issue 70, pp. 627-648.
- ❖ Biju, C. S. (2021). Post Identity Polemic in Anna Deavere Smith's "Performance Project Fires in the Mirror: Crown Height, Brooklyn and Other Identities". Research Journal of English (RJOE) Vol-6, Issue-2, pp. 147-163.
- ❖ Hamdan, Siham Hattab and Mohammed Qassim Hamid (2023). Representations of Racism in Children of Blood and Bone by Tomi Adeyemi. Lark Journal for Philosophy, Linguistics and Social Sciences. Volume 3, Issue 50 (2), pp. 753-769
- ❖ Hellman, J. (2013). E Pluribus Unum: A Study in Multi-Character Solo Performance in the Documentary Drama. Praxis: The Journal for Theatre, Performance Studies, and Criticism, pp.1-9.
- ❖ Henry, F., & Tator, C. (2006). The Colour of Democracy: Racism in Canadian Society (3rd ed.). Toronto: Thomson Nelson.
- ❖ Lyons, C. R., & Lyons, J. C. (1994). Anna Devere Smith: Perspectives on her performance within the context of critical theory. Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism, 43-66.
- ❖ Mureșan, R. (2019). Memory of the Voiceless. Verbatim, Cvasi-verbatim, Mockumentary. Colocvii Teatrale, (28), 76-103. DOI number 10.2478/tco-2019-0018.
- ❖ Smith, A. D. (1992). Fires in the Mirror. Anchor.
- ❖ Taha, Bahir Ibrahim and Mohammed Fezea Ibrahim (2020). The Double Faced Ideology: Antifeminism and Racism in Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eyes. Journal of Tikrit University for Humanities. Volume 27, Issue 8, pp. 56-66.