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SYMBOLISM AND THE INTERNATIONAL AUDIENCE
IN ASIAN-AFRICAN ART: AN EXPLORATION OF
BAHADUR TEJANI'S WORK

Annie K. Koshi

The following discussion of Bahadur Tejani's work is an exploration of the manner in which a culturally diverse writer of Indian origin from Africa uses familiar symbols to create artistic complexity and widen his audience appeal. As a writer who composes both in English and Gujrati, Tejani's work contains references from his ethnic-Gujrati background, selected ethos from the Baganda and African groups, Islamic and Hindu cultural details, and Western literary material. His first major work, *Day After Tomorrow* (E. A. L. B. 1971), for instance, deals with the complex theme of race-relations in Idi Aminland, where characters from all the above cultures interact against the background of the mountains, lakes, and the Serengeti plains in East Africa. The versatility of his creativity provides a broad range of output, making the body of his work engrossing to deal with. He has published poetry, plays, literary essays, short stories for adults and children, and a novel. Among the writers of Indian diaspora from Africa, he is a pioneer of a sort making his work have some historic significance. *Day After Tomorrow* was the first serious literary work by an Indian from East Africa, though it had been preceded by a simplistic tale called *Divorce Before Marriage*, co-authored by Rasik and Chimani (ACLALS 1975, 46). A play entitled *Babalola* (1967) was one of the first ones to be accepted from East Africa by the British Broadcasting Service in London for a radio dramatization. His second play, *The Other Side of the Coin*, was billed as the first Indo-Canadian play staged in Canada by an Indian group "The Forum of Young Asians" (PLAYBILL, March 10, 1976). Tejani was the first Ugandan-Asian to be represented in The Voice of America's broadcast series to Africa on African authors (Nichols, *African Writers*, 1984). This trend-setting may extend to repatriate contexts as well. His collection of poems entitled *The Rape of Literature* (Falcon, 1989), dealing with daily life in India, may be one of the few collections involving poetic interaction between a person born outside of India and native-born Indians. Geographically, thematically, and historically the creative output of this writer presents a variety of fertile contexts ready for critical investigation.

Some of his recent works, outlined below, indicate interaction with a contemporary American audience. "Black Cosmos," a recent short story published in *Wasafari* (1990) in England, deals with a humorous counter-claim by a Kenyan to share the American claim of

exploring the moon in the name of all "mankind." An essay entitled "A Very New Yorker" (*Community Review*, 1986) refers to his humanist vision and its relationship to an educated community. "Through literature and by the power of the pen this vision keeps us together," says Tejani (39), hinting at the transcendental power of the liberal imagination which advances the frontiers of understanding between peoples of contrasting cultures.

The focus of this exploration is the manner in which Tejani uses familiar symbols and language of representational reality to create his own artistic meaning and message. Its most elemental use can be found in his children's stories, where the literary device and language are used in an obvious and what may be described as a pure form. "Freedom Star" (*Asian Voices*, 1990) is an allusion to the mythic star associated with the birth of the messiah in Christian folklore. This familiar image is interwoven with the leitmotif from African-American culture dealing with the well known folktale of Brother Rabbit's escapade. In this tale the witty hare tricks his persecutor into granting him freedom by pleading for a variety of preferred ways to the death penalty. He asks the fox to do anything but throw him in the briar patch. The fox does this with great vehemence and fury, for all the past injuries, and the rabbit achieves his nirvana, by running off to his freedom. In "Freedom Star" we discover an equally helpless heroine, using guile to outwit her oppressors. In Tejani's narration, the Sun, Moon, and Earth have created a triangular gravity field to confine the little girl-star because she refuses to be anchored to any one of them in particular. The powerful trinity create a plan to rendezvous at the next eclipse to arrange for the permanent anchoring and confinement of the little girl into one of their gravity fields. At this point her plea echoes the rabbit's refrain. "Please don't let it be the next eclipse," says the little star to her oppressors. "I am terrified of the eclipse. It makes me afraid so. I have never been so trapped, so tied down and hopeless" (37). Predictably they decide to do just that. As the eclipse takes place, the Sun, Moon and Earth form a straight line, accidentally dissolving their gravity field, allowing the star to walk out to her freedom.

As with serious children's literature, there is a strong undercurrent of social comment in this story. For instance, the incentive offered by mother Earth to anchor the little girl to the Earth's gravity speaks of a pressing feminist issue. Mother Earth offers the star the creation of a new day to extend the weekend so that mothers can be with their children an extra day. However, there is a hitch: "All the calendars were fixed by men a long time ago. They will not create a three-day week-end. You, little star could be the solution. With your discovery we could have a new day created for the week. The week can be eight days long. It will be the most famous compromise in world history. The men will have their five days of work and the women will have a

three-day weekend" (34). Though the star rejects the offer at the end, in her freedom there is vindication of the feminist perspective. The girl-star becomes the symbol for newborn babes everywhere: "Once in a while, if you look carefully, you can see a bright little star on certain nights from the earth. Especially when a new baby is born" (37). The association of femininity with nativity is a pointed reminder of the under-represented role of the mother in religion. Overall in this story one can perceive a skilled blend of traditional Christian symbolism and a leitmotif from African-American folklore. Both are utilized to deliver a message dealing with a current social phenomenon. The personification of the planet as a little girl yearning for light and mobility is in keeping with current social trends, where women undergraduates outnumbered men in the nation's colleges in 1988. In this "Freedom Star" strikes the right note for the generation of young women who would not be anchored in anyone's gravity field and who would define their own playing field.

"Alice in Yankeeland" (TSAR, 1988) is a direct recall of Lewis Carroll's little girl to catch audience attention. And so it does, creating some funny and provocative examination of corporate conformity. It deals with the interaction between Alice and an American magnate who views time through the restrictive lenses of business cycles. On board the ubiquitous Concord, he conveys his anxiety to Alice: "Because I travel at twice the speed of sound, it's all different. When it's playtime for the dog, I think it's chow time, and when the dog wants to eat, I want to play." As a cat owner Alice has ready sympathy to offer for his predicament. "That is tragic," she says (53).

In the by-play between the child and the corporate executive, the writer brings out the sudden interlocking of cultural worlds and the conflicting notions of time and value. The time-regulated Western world is brought into contradictory harmony with the lifestyle of other cultures through logical fallacy and irony. The section is delightful to read and offers an excellent example of Tejani's style where casual conversation and familiarity disguise deeper shades of meaning and satire:

"What time is it now?" Alice asked.

"Just after dawn and before work."

"What kind of time is that?"

"I am sure you know. There are all kinds of time. A time to talk and a time to play. Some people even have time for war and a different time for peace."

"I mean what time is it by your watch," said Alice giving a loud yawn.

Her host raised his hands in a gesture of surrender. "Look," he said, "no watch. My times are built inside my head. For me

there is a time to get up and feed the animal and a time to work. Then a time to play with the dog and time to watch T. V. This way I am completely at home with the movement of the earth and the seasons."

"How dull is all that!" said Alice giving another yawn.

"Ah, but how predictable. Wouldn't you like to be free of the tyranny of time?"

"Most people don't think like that," Alice retorted.

"Contrariwise, they do and did."

"Are you telling me the truth?" Alice asked seriously.

"I kid you not," her friend replied. "All over Africa, India and China nearly two billion people measure time by looking at the sun and how high it is in the sky."

"It is all *wrong*," Alice said impatiently. "For if this was true, why is our calendar a lunar calendar. Everybody counts the days and the months by the moon, don't they?"

"But they don't count the hours by the moon do they?"

"That's only because the moon is much too small to count the hours with," said Alice with finality. "Now if the moon was as large as the Sun I am sure it would be very useful to count the hours with."

"Ah, but you see it isn't," her companion said as if he had really won the argument.

Alice dismissed this with the contempt it deserved. "That isn't the moon's fault," she said (p.55).

One cannot escape the feeling that there is a latent need here for the businessman to escape the tyranny of time in his culture and blend with the rhythms of nature and the seasons.

In a third story entitled "The Big Apple" (MS) Tejani attempts to empower the powerless. Whereas in "Freedom Star" the heroine is a growing girl, in "The Big Apple" she is an old woman cast out by society. The title reflects a catchy phrase, for New Yorkers certainly and for most American readers as well. The image of the juicy apple as the emblem for York evokes realms of plenty. In the midst of this wealth is the stranded figure of poor Mrs. Hobo, a persona of caricature and amusement, and representative of her social group. Her background would make sense to many an educator: "Having been to a New York City school, she could neither write nor understand much of what she read" (1). As a homeless person, she is shuttled from one place to another, finally arriving at "Castle Shelter-House" where taxis purr like obedient cats, amid an aroma of bagels and scented herbs. Due to her enforced status as a dependent, Mrs. Hobo responds to these stimuli with perceptibly ironic eagerness. The total credulity with which this waif of modern materialism responds to the New York bureaucrat is

hilarious. Running up to the official in charge of "Castle Shelter-House" Mrs. Hobo enquires:

"Where is my place going to be here?"

"In hell!" he muttered.

"What dearie?"

"You go to hell," he said matter of fact.

Mrs. Hobo was delighted. "What an efficient man!" she thought, "He placed me so quickly."

"But how do I get there" she said. For the first time the man looked at her. "I don't know. Ask anybody here." He got up and left (2).

In trying to return his fallen goods to a banker, she recovers the heavy metal bar he's dropped and follows him into the Stock Exchange. Here she is attacked by two guard dogs, suitably named Dow and Jones, and she runs for her life from the masters of the financial index. Clutching the bar she ends up where all motorists do in New York—at the Bureau of Parking Violations. Here at last she finds a like-minded individual who has embarked upon a quest similar to her own: a clerk steeped into ink and blue with carbon paper, struggling to raise himself by his hair, trying to make sense out of the muddle of parking violations before him. He mutters the magic mantra for which Mrs. Hobo has been waiting all through the night. "This is Hell!" says he, to no one in particular. In response to her question about "her place in hell," he looks up his book of violations and asks her the standard clerical question: "How do you plead?" "Miserably," she responds. During their bizarre exchange, she presents him with the yellow metal bar to pay for her transgression and he, in turn, creates an official uproar so she can go to hell. In the ensuing melee to acquire the gold she has brought, the Mayor offers Mrs. Hobo a machine as an exchange. Flabbergasted but relieved, the old lady runs out, cranks up the machine and discovers the pretty yellow slips emerging from the machine. Delightfully she shares these out by sticking one on every windshield wiper she can find. "And that's how," says the author, "we get our parking tickets in New York City" (97).

While the story is conceived as a fairy tale, the homeless heroine and the real life situation in New York City's Parking Bureau, glutted with fraud, lands the tale a strong social context. Beginning with a familiar touch, the author is able to survey the Big Apple's foibles with detachment and satire. Aesthetically, one feels vindicated to see a down-trodden helpless woman escaping her condition and imposing a degree of punishment on the propertied citizenry who tacitly comply with her neglect.

In "The Writer" (EAJ 1967), while using a well-worn term, Tejani creates some unusual significance. The story stands as a symbol for African renaissance and hubris, a motif expressive of the power of the first wave of African independence in the 1960s. Guest editor, Rubdiri, acknowledged the ambivalent undercurrents of the story and its strong political symbolism by giving "The Writer" the first place in the journal of creative writing in East Africa in the year of publication. The interaction between the Indian and the African worlds in the tale provides the key to the symbolic representation of African political realities. Indian folklore has it that when Akbar the Great wanted to test the integrity of one of his court actors, he challenged him to act out the role of a Sati. True to his art, the actor did this unflinchingly, acting and committing Sati on the stage and immolating himself in the process. The leitmotif acts as a compelling need for the quest of the main character in "The Writer," depicting an author in search of immortality for the sake of artistic fulfillment.

This image of divine purification by fire haunts the visionary mind of the African writer, Abebe Akhila in the story. His name is derived from the legendary athlete Abebe Bikhila, the first African to win the marathon in the Olympics in 1960 while running barefoot. The derivation evokes the suggestion that the writer in the story is a front-runner on the literary scene as the athlete was in the Olympics. To fulfill the artistic quest, the writer plots to have himself sentenced to death for the fictitious demise of his wife. He does this to empower his vision by being close to the atmosphere of ultimate extinction and thus enable himself to be in the shoes of an inmate on death row. The Orwellian attempt to bear witness to human predicament and extend the frontiers of our concern fails. Akhila's pre-arranged strategy for a last minute Presidential pardon backfires. Unwittingly the writer finds himself committed to a sacrifice for the sake of an ideal like the Sati-actor in the Indian folklore.

This may seem like the super-imposition of Indian aesthetics on African conditions. Yet, interpreted symbolically, the theme of searching for ultimate solutions was common in African politics at the time "The Writer" was published. In the 1960s, affected by the great wave of African renaissance, the testing of ideas on the battlefield of life was a recurrent phenomenon. It led to excess in political conflicts often over-spilling into civil wars, as in Nigeria, Uganda, Congo, and elsewhere. The effect of reading "The Writer" then is one of intrigue, suspense, and of admiration for Akhila's quest; of a growing realization of excess in the name of the renaissance. Perhaps not unusual when it comes to questions of national identity.

This theme is given extended treatment in Tejani's first play "Babalola" (1967) where the name provides a clue to the setting and the design. Babalola, or Ola's father, is a common name among the Yoruba

of Nigeria. As one of the earliest nations to gain independence, Nigeria stood for the zenith of African aspirations, due to its cultural prominence and population size. The rich resources and educated citizenry held great promise of development but internal factionalism soon turned the Nigerian dream into a nightmare. Ethnic destruction, military dictatorship, and civil war ensued. The nation became a house divided against itself. The euphoria of passionately creating things anew was matched by the urgency to maintain law and order. Soon this became a major aspect of the African condition. This very predicament is faced by Babalola and his family in the play. Social good as exemplified by the strong rationalism of the father clashes with the individualism and lyrical passion of the son as a representative of the younger generation. In between is the tragic figure of the mother, symbol of the suffering masses, watching in growing trepidation as her males drive themselves to inexorable destruction. On the sidelines hover the helpless elders, waiting and unable to contain the collision. In the background is the powerful shadow of nature, manifested by thunder, lightning, and storm, much like the plagues of famine, coups, and jealousy driving Africa asunder. Thus, in the fashion of a Greek tragedy, the events that follow a course where the greater good is drowned in a cycle of unpredictable chaos, of soul-searching, and lament for the loss of the fine and the strong.

In contrast to this early tragic mode, a farce, *The Other Side of the Coin*, has two major figures from world history—Gandhi and Churchill—as the protagonists. Their roles are reversed in keeping with exposing the other side of power. An ebullient, provocative Gandhi bullies, banter, and dresses down the British prime minister at 10 Downing Street. There are abundant lines from Gandhi, like "We have come to give you independence not to ask for it. After all who is dependent on whom?" and "You know Churchill, I am a non-violent man. I wouldn't like to see the British pound getting hurt" (4).

The plot carries with it the examination of some very pertinent questions. While the situations are farcical and often absurd, the significance is serious. Four kinds of Indians have turned up at the British prime minister's door. There is the Mahatma, a one of a kind Indian, a West Indian, an East Indian, and an American Indian. Each one has a special grievance to present to Her Majesty's government. The Mahatma wants the British to stop depending on the Indians; the Jamaican is peeved by the Governor's ungentlemanly conduct at a cricket match because the latter walked off with the bails; the Sikh claims the city of Vancouver in British Columbia, Canada, because "Buncouver" is a part of his heritage; and the Native American has a grievance about Columbus, because he was color blind and unable to distinguish between red men and brown men. Churchill is fairly overwhelmed by the different kinds of Indians at his door and solves the

problem in characteristic imperial manner by calling a round table conference. The political satire is aimed at British ethno-centrism and the resultant mono-culturalism in the Empire implicit throughout the play. It is based on a question which reverberates through world history and modern globalism: "Who is that created all this labels for different types of 'Indians' and gave them social currency?"

Some scintillating lines in the play provide glimpses of Tejani's satire and absurd word play. At one point, during the dialectic of persuasion used by Gandhi to make Churchill pay back the "hundred year loan," the following conversation takes place between the two:

Gandhi: You know Churchill, it's a pity you didn't visit Khajurao when you came to India. You should have seen our Gods and Goddesses making love. It would have alleviated you soul. There are forty-nine ways of doing it you know.

Churchill: Doing what?

Gandhi: Making love. (To the audience) One has to be explicit to an Englishman. He doesn't understand the language of love.

C: Forty-nine ways of making love! Why that's immoral. There is only one way of doing it.

G: Oh Yeah? What's that?

C: (Puts his thumbs down) The British way (8).

The absurd interaction provides humor as well as an antidote to Imperial aesthetics. At another point, the Ameri-Indian provides an insight into the genesis of colonial custom of labelling ethnic groups, via Columbus's nose. Churchill has a query to the befeathered presence in Her Majesty's governing center at 10 Downing Street:

Churchill: And how did you become an Indian Chief?

Native-American: Big chief Christopher Columbus come to North America. Him color blind. Him see Blackfoot-Cree sitting under tree cooking Gallagaboosh. Him think he smell spices. Him think like crazy government to-day. All people eat spices must be Indian. Me Chief Red Eagle. Mighty long time, no eat spices (15).

On the stage the contrast between the pin-striped Prime Minister and the eagle-crested chief couldn't be sharper. So are their world views, their

language, and their perceptions of reality. To observe the contrast and to listen to their diverging voices is to understand four centuries of history in a scene. Absurd moments are best dealt with with laughter.

Elsewhere I have commented in detail on the symbolism and audience rapport in Tejani's novel, *Day After Tomorrow* (Wasafiri 1991). Below is a brief analysis of symbols from his poetry to provide a rounded view of his works. Unlike the creative works discussed above, his poems have found their way in the mainstream presses, including some in an anthology edited by Wole Soyinka (*Poems From Black Africa* 1974). Of interest to this topic are poems with symbols which evoke unity and harmony and appeal to a wider audience. In "Serengeti Night," against a backdrop of sensuous images carved from the majesty of nature, there is a bonding between humans and an unquenchable spirit of togetherness. The short poem is worth quoting in its entirety, since it defines Tejani's sensibility in all its symbolic richness and originality:

The black earth echoes
 a panting sky
 shimmering in eerie silence
 the tracks feel
 desolate
 as a hungry widow's hut
 a bereft wind
 has stopped breathing
 the trees huddle
 in fearful pools
 the massive heart
 is shorn of
 hum and quiver
 only the warm touch
 of a hand in hand
 recalls
 our identity (*Community Review*, 56)

In a poem emphasizing the dour and the momentous, a climb to Africa's highest peak on Mount Kilimanjaro, the perspective on unity mentioned above is evoked with lyricism and cosmic musing:

Nothing but the stillness
 of the snow
 and an ageless majesty
 matched
 by those enduring horizons
 that bridge the heights

of you and me (Cook & Rubadiri 176).

Elsewhere in the poems we find a splendid inquisitiveness which succors the streets, discovering and focusing upon the poor, the lonely, and the neglected faces of Nairobi, Calcutta, and London. An unflinching desire to depict contrasts leads the writer to create poignant images. Here is the outstretched hand of a wanderer in the street, whose

eyeless music
fumbles in the road
for an understanding hand
a hospitable coin (*Community Review*, 75)

It is perhaps fitting to end this discussion with reference to a poem which is symbolic of the condition of the diaspora. In "Leaving the Country" Tejani evokes this in just four lines with remarkable economy and definition of mood. He calls the state of diaspora

a deep daze of dislocation
from color
and creed
and country (*The Rape of Literature*, 39).

Yet, even here, though "everything is unknown," and pregnant with absence of purpose, there is room for philosophic wisdom and solace. In the following lines we can once again see the genuine need for a community of scholars and intellectuals who rise above divisiveness and discord to exploration and acceptance. The poet says:

Only one solace
there have been
others too,
lingering in that twilight
who shed
home and country and at times
color
who travelled the long way
and also never felt happy (40).

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