

UCLA

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies

Title

An Interview with Bahadur Tejani

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8tk4t1cv>

Journal

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 21(3)

ISSN

0041-5715

Author

Koshi, Annie K.

Publication Date

1993

DOI

10.5070/F7213016750

Copyright Information

Copyright 1993 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

AN INTERVIEW WITH BAHADUR TEJANI

by Annie K. Koshi

(conducted at Tejani's residence, January 15, 1993)

A. K.: Bahadur Tejani, it is a pleasure to see you again. As you know, there is a lot of interest in African-Asian writers now. Greenwood Press is soon bringing out a book on Literature of Indian Diaspora with Emmanuel Nelson of SUNY [State University of New York. Ed.], Cortland, and *WASAFIRI* in England had an issue on this with commentary on your work. Let me just ask you about the origins of your creative inspiration, because I am sure our readers would like to know this about an Asian writer from Africa. When and how did you start your journey into the world of imagination?

B. T.: If it is origins you are looking for, I will have to go straight to my mother. Forty-seven years ago, when I was three, she would narrate in vivid details the social life of the Indian immigrants living on the slopes of Mount Kilimanjaro, Kenya. Snow-capped peaks, undulating valleys and a scene she described of innocence outraged—these became an organic part of my memories of African village roots so much so that I included this in my memoirs, while bidding Uganda farewell through *Transition* when Idi Amin came to power in the '70s.

A. K.: Are you referring to the article "Farewell Uganda" in *Transition*?

B. T.: Yes.

A. K.: It is full of memories. But which episode in here refers to "outraged innocence" and maternal inspiration in creativity?

B. T.: The one about the night-watchman in the village of Sultan-Hamud, Kenya. He was falsely accused by the traders of collaborating with the thieves who came to raid their property. The dramatic moment in my mother's narration was when she recreated the terror and the desperate courage of the little fellow who had to vindicate his reputation in society. This became my first understanding of the tension between oppression and freedom and the sense of pity for the downtrodden.

A. K.: Your first novel is dedicated to Ngugi, among others. Was he also a source of inspiration for you?

B. T.: His stimulation and pioneering spirit was truly vital in starting us indigenes in Kenya and Uganda on the literary pathway. Ngugi and I were classmates at Makerere, 1959-64, and saw each other almost everyday. When he graduated, he came out with *The River Between*. It was the beginning of a creative outlet for many of us. One felt that if a person who was a close friend could shatter the barriers of silence, we could do it as well. Ngugi's was a genuine search for self-knowledge and it empowered and inspired many of us.

A. K.: You have had several plays staged, notably *Gandhi and Churchill*, which is the first Indo-Canadian play from Canada, in 1976. Was there a complementary influence here as well?

B. T.: There is a stage between narrative prose and dramatic act. For me, it transpired way back in the village square in Singida, Tanzania. My father would recite the Ramayana or the Mahabharata, Indian epics dating back to 500 B.C., and he would assign parts for us to enact the dramatic scenes, often partaking in the action himself.

A. K.: In India, the recitation of this epic is done by heart. How was it in your situation in Africa?

B. T.: Well, the time period I am referring to here is the 1940s. But even today, none of us in the family have seen a printed version of the epics. Yet, all of us are conversant with the dramatic action and symbolic significance of the characters of these epics. The ability of folks like my father and others to integrate words, music, body language, and dramatic gesture is marvelous. I am sure that under the façade of modern western education there is an immense reservoir of creative imagination and action full of variety, tone, and poetic meanings waiting to be released from people of the last generation because they represent an old and established culture.

A. K.: Is the reference to epics an active part of daily life for you? In the west, it is common to use the Bible as a reference. "Well, don't crucify him for a little mistake," one might say, and the reference would be immediate.

B. T.: Within our extended family, if a person is creative, and unsettled as to status, he would be immediately dubbed "Wandering Rama," an allusion to Rama's fourteen year exile in the epic. So there's good interaction between the symbols from the tales and everyday event.

A. K.: How does this Indian oral tradition relate to the African tradition? Do they complement each other historically or thematically?

B. T.: For me parental heritage provided a well-spanned bridge to African consciousness. In both Asian and African cultures, the history of the group, race, or the continent itself is long and enduring, so that when African renaissance came in the 1960s to re-establish African literature and orature on the world stage, I could readily empathize with the creative endeavors of my colleagues. As with the African elders, our parents had been practising the professions of the Homeric bards for many generations for sheer delight and for ceremony and custom.

A. K.: A Yeatsian synthesis?

B. T.: Yes. In this the Irish parallel the Africans and the Asians in many areas. *Things Fall Apart* is the well-defined voice of the bard in Nigeria, singing for native representation amid foreign tongues, while using an Irish metaphor.

A. K.: Is there a comparable figure like Yeats who blends traditional aesthetics with modern means of artistic communication in Africa, in your view?

B. T.: Okot P'Bitek comes immediately to mind. I would like to quote to you a spontaneous utterance I made about Okot at the Boston African Studies Association Conference a decade ago. "A powerful personality with rich inner resources of wit and common sense, a spirit of liberty, gaiety, and intellectual frivolity, an intellectual gad-fly par excellence, a spiritualist dedicated to recover the submerged forms of creative consciousness and native energy." This is how I saw him in 1976.

A. K.: This is very laudatory. He seems to have influenced you somewhat?

B. T.: In many ways. Some positive, others negative.

A. K.: Negative?

B. T.: I just feel that art and imagination are such fragile life-lines. If we pull at them too much, they snap and lead the dependent to despondency, despair, and destruction.

A. K.: Could you elaborate on this?

B. T.: I could. But first let me tell you how positive an influence Okot was for me and for a lot of younger writers. He was fearless,

passionate, and scintillatingly witty. Out of five, these three are the most important traits of a rich human personality . . .

A. K.: Excuse the interruption, but what are the other two?

B. T.: Wisdom and capacity to suffer.

A. K.: And love . . . ?

B. T.: This transcends all. To love is divine.

A. K.: O. K. Before we get side-swept into divinity and love, why are fearlessness, passion, and wit important for culture and human personality?

B. T.: Okot was an unrestrained advocate of free speech. He said what he felt about event, person, and idea, regardless of where, when, and to whom. This fearlessness is the essence of the free spirit because social restraints from the family, school, work-place, and the government teach us to obey, say, and often feel and accept their views.

A. K.: Everywhere?

B. T.: Everywhere. It is called socialization. Most successful people who live a long and productive life understand this vital aspect of socio-politics. They conform to it, live by it, mold themselves through the social image. Sometimes they become the image and *are* as the others see them.

A. K.: . . . and Okot?

B. T.: This is where his negative influence came in. As a poet and a soccer player on the national team, he was so strong and intense that he brooked no restraints. He lived every moment to the full, and only a few of us who were very close to him saw the deepest despondency come to the surface. Occasionally, the contrast between intensity, between passion and social demand, somewhat ravaged him. I believe this was one of the causes of his early death.

A. K.: Africa lost a great son in him. But his legacy will doubtless carry on.

B. T.: Especially his wit. It is a timeless quality he shared happily. In public meetings and across the dinner table, his ability to infuse the situation with humor, pun or jibe was enthralling. Much of it has

become an inexhaustible store of imaginative inter-play for me. The splendor of this is that it makes the company vibrate with pleasure and often ricochet with words so that others join in the fray with delight. Lawino, you will recollect, hurls laughter at the people.

A. K.: Is there a suggestion in all this that Okot didn't have the qualities of wisdom and capacity for suffering or the transcendence of love?

B. T.: Of love he had plenty. I have personally felt the immanent force of his love. His fraternal name for me was Tejukus. Though I never asked, I assume it meant little Tejani. Okot was wise but lacked comparable wisdom. I don't think suffering entered his thoughts. *Joie de vivre* was a transcendental force for him.

A. K.: I would like to discuss some of your career highs. Your presence at the first African Congress of Writers and Researchers in Dakar, for instance.

B. T.: That happened as a series of incredible events. After Soyinka wrote to me, inviting me for the Conference in '76, there was no more news. Then on 2nd February at 7:00 a. m., a man called Tejani, no less, calls from 3,000 miles away, from the Senegalese Embassy of Canada, saying the ticket to Dakar is ready. I was in Vancouver then. "Come, get it," he says. We had partying all night, after the staging of my play on Gandhi and Churchill. Well, the conference was to start in the next 48 hours, and this meant solving the problem of my statelessness, obtaining a traveling document, getting the tickets from Ottawa and being en route!

A. K.: Must have been exhilarating!

B. T.: It was. To meet Senghor, Soyinka, Cheikh Anta Diop and others as an invited guest was a real high.

A. K.: Can I take you to the comment you made on Soyinka in your report on the conference then? "Like a Colossus striding the continent Soyinka's spirit held the Congress together. The whole effort of synthesis (of African traditions and modernity) can be understood by the magnificent challenge this writer is setting himself. It is to deliberately administer and creatively reconstruct the flaws and ills of Africa which he, the artist-intellectual-idealist par excellence has mercilessly exposed so far." Did you have any inkling at that time, when you wrote this, that Wole Soyinka could actually stride the oceans, that he would become the first African to win the Nobel Prize for literature?

B. T.: Not in the exact form, though I did remember these very words, when the news came through.

A. K.: Let me probe further if you don't mind. What made you write these words? Was it something special that Soyinka said or did?

B. T.: Essentially, the inspiration for the above comment was the spirit of the Conference. There was such deep and integrated energy, a spiritual resonance, an African resurrection and determination during the meeting. I can only compare this to the overwhelming zip William and Shirley Dubois received at the 40th anniversary of the Bolshevik revolution as invited guests of the Kremlin. "Now here we are," wrote Mrs. Dubois, "ordinary citizens—not ordinary citizens, black second-class citizens from the world's most assured democracy—here we are joining with the citizens of the Soviet Union to celebrate their revolution and the dawn of a new Russia."

A. K.: The similarity being that like the Dubois, you were a second-class citizen in Uganda?

B. T.: For me it came to having no class at all. I was stateless at this time. So according to Shirley, she and Dubois stood out by their color, culture, and significance, none of which their own land was willing to grant them. They felt marvelously uplifted at the Kremlin. I had a similar emotional high, being the only Asian-African amid the distinguished company. So going back to the conference, one could say that the inspiration to pen these words came from the flamboyant energy generated by the writers and scholars communally.

A. K.: There seems to have been plenty of energy at the meeting, which takes me to the apparent contradiction of another one of your comments dealing with Negritude, at the conference. "Negritude," you said, "is far from dead in Senegal. On the second night in Dakar, the Theater National Daniel Sorano (directed by Senghor's nephew, Maurice Sonar Senghor) demonstrated the most powerful and vivid example of living Negritude. The incredible joy, stupendous energy, blend of undisguised individuality and deeply-shared communal harmony of the dancers came from the deepest part of their tradition. It was the very center of the earth speaking to us." Now, how do you reconcile this to your description of Soyinka and also to his articulated position at the Conference where he said: "There are many outdated African philosophies and Negritude is unquestionably one of them."

B. T.: The affirmation of life for which Negritude stands is a creative act. To be critical of life is an intellectual act. The latter underscores the

vitality of Soyinka's perception. Both these co-exist in a writer and on the continent of Africa as symbols of our modernity. I see the two principles as a synthesis, like nature and man-made perfection. Not as a contradiction.

A. K.: The other highlight mentioned by your biographer, Arlene Elder Cincinnati, is the first Ph. D. in African literature in East Africa.

B. T.: Yes, and it was especially good to know that this has the stamp of Eldred Durosimi Jones of Sierra Leone. Even though it happened so many years ago, in 1974, I can look back on it, ever so often. Prof. Jones, as you know, is a pioneer in African literary criticism.

A. K.: Why is the first important to you though?

B. T.: It's to do with a sense of achievement. An awareness and a knowledge that I too could be a pioneer like Ngugi and the others. It was, after all, the very first doctoral thesis, begun and finished in our home environment. For me, this was the perfect antidote to colonial scholarship.

A. K.: I assume this had some significance at that time.

B. T.: At least it showed to the world that there was no need for experts from outside Africa to tell us what to write, critically speaking, about our own culture, people, politics, and society. It meant that one could take control of one's own destiny, influence the nature and timing of change, and hold the reins of information in one's own hands.

A. K.: Was it perceived by others in this manner?

B. T.: Not altogether. But personally for me, it was the culmination of a minor quest. There are parallels to this in other writers and cultures when they challenged British colonialism.

A. K.: For instance?

B. T.: Like when 33 year-old Ralph Waldo Emerson was laying the groundwork for the decolonization of American literature in 1837, he said to the Harvard Phi Beta Kappa, "Our day of dependence, our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands, draws to a close. The millions that around us are rushing into life, cannot always be fed on the sere remains of foreign harvest."

A. K.: Meaning that Emerson and others like him had been force-fed on literature of other lands as opposed to creating their own.

B. T.: Absolutely. When you realize that for us school children in Africa, a lesson in geography, taught by an English master started with "Kampala, in Uganda, is 5,200 miles from London, England," then pioneering work which took into account Kampala's own environment and as a starting point became important.

A. K.: Side by side with this working-class fare there are references to a wider world.

B. T.: A part of the movement of the novel.

A. K.: Nature and particularly the Serengeti valley appear as recurring themes and images in your work. You have the climatic scene in the novel dealing the union of races, set in Serengeti; then there is the oft-printed poem "Wild Horse of Serengeti," and also recently "Serengeti Night," dealing with humans reaching out for each other. Does the recurrence have a special meaning?

B. T.: It is like the variations of a melody with different notes and beats. I grew up a few miles from the Serengeti plains, in Singida, Tanzania, and they occupy a very special place in my imagination. Here you will find man, predator, herbivore, and fowl of the air in intimate, almost symbiotic relationship to one another and with the land. It is truly the Garden of Eden.

A. K.: Is it that harmonious?

B. T.: Let me read to you an entry from my private journal on this when I visited the very heart of the Serengeti in 1969. "Tall savanna grass waving in the wind create a sense of movement, color and harmony, free from the control of man. At the very pulsating center of the plains is the life-like image of the Garden of Eden which humanity hankers for and celebrates. This is the Ngorongoro Crater, close to Olduvai Gorge where *Zinjanthropus* was born. It is 10,000 feet deep, remote, unique, and majestic. The magnificent brilliance of the mountainside, these sweeping curves of sky blue, indigo, jungle green, earth brown, dappled dawn and dusky glow, arouse wonder and reverence. The enormity of distance, defined by the crater's rim, yet beyond reach, evokes a paramount feeling of leaving the present behind for a rendezvous with the old world of creation. Below are thundering herds of zebra, deer and spectacular giraffes. Monkeys swing from the branches. Plaintive bird-call rent the air. In the deep recess of the land

is a large azure blue lake, shimmering in the African sunshine, reflecting in its placid waters the undisturbed serenity of the majestic mountains. On its shore are the homes of Masai men and women."

A. K.: This is splendid. Do the other African writers dwell on nature as a force in their work with equal intensity?

B. T.: It's there in Ngugi's *[The] River Between* when father and son explore the beatific vision of the land under the sacred Mugumo tree; in Oculi's description of the heroine running in the wind in *The Prostitute*; in Senghor's poems.

A. K.: A negritudinalist vision then?

B. T.: Romance for the land, for the light, for the natural and the eternal, transcends philosophic restrictions. The way Whitman and others came to love their land is the way we love ours.

A. K.: Now at a philosophic level, there are lines in one of your poems, "Leaving the country," which Soyinka included in his anthology of *Poems of Black Africa*. These lines seem to relate to your self-awareness and the condition of other African writers. You say

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

Is this a reference to your exile from Uganda?

B. T.: The lines were composed in India and refer to the Indian cultural context, but one can extend the political frame of the poem.

A. K.: India was home and country to you?

B. T.: It would have been and still is the repository of parental-ancestral culture. Dubois, Garvey, Camara Laye, Senghor, Oludah Equino, all lived away from home but wouldn't forget their ancestors.

A. K.: Who are the "others" you refer to here in the poem, and how do they give you solace?

B. T.: These lines are symbolic of the modern migrants, people who are forcibly uprooted lock, stock, barrel, and bed. They are made to move from countries, even continents, because of military force.

A. K.: You mean the ethnic population displacement in India and Africa?

B. T.: Yes. Side by side with independence, decolonization led to the homelessness of millions of people in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Biafra, the Congo, Ethiopia, not to forget my homeland in Uganda. But specifically, the companionship referred to is the company of exiled writers from India and Africa.

A. K.: Can you name the company?

B. T.: In India, specifically, it was Dom Moraes, the poet, who became a protege of Stephen Spender and wrote a wonderful inspirational autobiography for young writers. In Africa, there are many compatriots who had to undergo this search for stable existence. Ngugi, Nazareth, Okot, De Graft, Armah, to name a few.

A. K.: Has exile changed your outlook on life? Do you still need solace?

B. T.: Initially, the resettlement out of Uganda was very hard. But you know, the older I grow, the more I get used to the idea that change and perhaps its inevitable friend instability are essential parts of creative living.

A. K.: Can you explain this?

B. T.: Well, when I look at what Arnold Rampersad of Columbia says of John Williams, a revered man of letters, what he said of Williams two years ago, that "John reached the comparative safety of the Academe," I realize that Rampersad is looking at some specially ambivalent condition of modernity.

A. K.: And this would be . . . ?

B. T.: The constant flux which a writer undergoes in his life-time. The context is significant because Rampersad's comment is being made about John Williams when John has reached the stage of being the

second most prolific fiction writer in the two hundred year history of African-American work in the year 1990. Hence, if Rampersad chooses to dwell on this fact of constant search for stability at the time when Williams is so fully established, it is a sobering revelation for an immigrant like myself.

A. K.: Are you implying that the quest for security is nebulous?

B. T.: I'm saying that such a philosophy allows you to overcome many a setback. Poor times, poor health, and even poor recognition can be looked at in the face, for better times. In my understanding of modernity I will tell you of the starkly revealing example of Justice Thurgood Marshall. I have a special link to this man who represents an era in himself. He came to Uganda in 1963 to explain the civil rights struggle, and I was among the student leaders at Makerere who were invited to meet him. To this was a small meeting, almost face to face. I will ever remember his words on that occasion. "If I don't want to sit in the back of the bus, no one should tell me to do that!" he said. Now, a quarter century later, when he is retiring as a Justice of the Supreme Court, he says, "I am not free." Whatever the political nature of this gauntlet he flung to the nation, by saying "I am not free" at his exit conference, it humbles me to realize how long and arduous the road to freedom and stability can be.

A. K.: Are they synonymous then?

B. T.: Stability is a pathway to freedom.

A. K.: Let me persist. Has exile made you better then? Or have you lost a lot along the way?

B. T.: We have shed a lot of cultural baggage along the way. Our ancestral language of Gujrati and culture is gradually fading. So is some of the vital African experience and touch. But it is being replaced by something equally relevant.

A. K.: And this is?

B. T.: If the older world is a wizard at creating memory and synthesis, the American world is a wizard at materialism and technology. These two highly important elements of modernity have replaced our memory and the sense of integrated experience. This means that both physically and intellectually we can withstand change and challenge with greater fortitude, ingenuity, and resources.

A. K.: Does this affect the writing?

B. T.: Somewhat. I have to search for a new audience. But then this is a constant search.

A. K.: Bahadur Tejani, thank you so much for the interview.

B. T.: You are welcome.