



From Lorca to Bollywood: cultural adaptation in the plays of the British Asian Tamasha Theatre Company

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From Lorca to Bollywood: cultural adaptation in the plays of the British Asian Tamasha Theatre Company

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Anne Fuchs, now retired, taught Comparative Literature and Drama at the University of Nice-Sophia Antipolis. She has just revised and updated *Playing the Market – The Market Theatre, Johannesburg 1976-1986* (Harwood) first published in 1990, and has written numerous articles and edited, or co-edited, several books including *Theatre and Change in South Africa* (Harwood 1996) and *New Theatre in Francophone and Anglophone Africa* (Rodopi, 1999). She is at present working on Black British Theatre.

Starting with a brief comparison between the Irish and Indian Diasporas, the paper goes on to mention three distinct approaches by British Asians to theatre today. What is meant by “creative dialogue” with reference to the Tamasha Theatre Company? The corpus of their work is mainly concerned with a form of realism and cultural adaptation. There follows a discussion of the different forms this cultural adaptation has taken, whether an adaptation to Western performance modes or an adaptation of subject-matter originating in Asian or Western literature for the purpose of writing or devising an intra-cultural spectacle or “tamasha”.

British theatre over the centuries has had its mainstream in London with tributaries all over the British Isles, innovating and subsequently often affecting, and adding to, the vibrant stage culture of the capital. In the first half of the twentieth century Irish dramatists both before and after partition were particularly in evidence. This is of interest because Ireland was the first British colony and the relationship between Irish artists and England had always been complex: “native” Irish and Anglo-Irish, from Swift, Sheridan and Burke onwards, had greatly contributed to English language literature and drama. Some such as Swift took Ireland as their main theme, others such as Sheridan and much later Oscar Wilde and Bernard Shaw became almost exclusively concerned with English manners and, taking up their residence in England, often wrote for an English public. Yet again the Brontë family became completely Anglicized and seemingly ignored their origins and, in contrast, twentieth century Sean O’Casey had nearly all his Irish-oriented plays first produced in Dublin where English-speaking theatres began to prosper. These allusions to Ireland which was not originally an English-speaking country are intended to convey the great complexity and often unexpected developments in an intra-cultural situation not entirely similar but comparable in many ways to that of the immigrant population from the Indian sub-continent.

The two main differences from the Irish situation are, first, that the Asian immigrants to Britain in the second half of the twentieth century always arrived in Britain with a cultural heritage, if not language, probably stronger and even more alive in India than the aseptitized and often Americanized eurocentric values they were met with. Secondly, they arrived with other immigrants from the Caribbean and Africa and as far as the British public and British institutions were concerned became part of Black Britain. It may be noted of course that essentially both Afro-Caribbean and Asian immigrants had more in common with the native British themselves than with each other. Another parameter which might be taken into account is that of the dominant or subordinate nature of the various diasporic movements. Without going into detail, it would seem that in colonial situations the massive Irish Diaspora (today over seventy million) leaving to better themselves, through obvious advantages such as skin-colour and long-established English language skills, have been assimilated into the

hegemonic Anglo-Saxon class; at the other end of the scale African immigrants would be more likely to be part of the huge slave-trade conveyed against their will to be disembarked anywhere from north to south along the shores of the American continent and islands. It may be contended that Asian immigrants from the sub-continent fall between the two; as indentured labourers in East and Southern Africa, their status in the nineteenth century was hardly higher than that of Black slaves in the States. Their situation, however, was to change substantially over a period of time with former railway-building and sugar plantation workers setting up as shopkeepers and forming an intermediate class between white colonials and the indigenous African population. This economic and to a certain extent social change did not mean assimilation either politically or culturally and after Kenyan independence, a wholesale expulsion by African leaders of the Indian population took place with the majority choosing to journey on to Britain rather than return to the poverty of the sub-continent.

There is a case to be made for the main characteristic of the immigrants from the Indian sub-continent being that of non-assimilation either with the native population in Africa or with the native British; the reasons being linked in all probability to religious differences, Muslim and Hindu traditions and customs pervading Asian cultures which often had otherwise little in common. This speculation apart, the cultural situation in Britain today is a thousand times more complicated and the numerous intra-cultural links between British and Asians permeate performance modes in the media of theatre, television and cinema. As far as Asian theatre is concerned, the first ten years of the Tamasha Theatre Company are particularly relevant to the establishment of these intra-cultural links between eurocentred British forms and those of the sub-continent. Founded in 1989, Tamasha was not one of the first manifestations of British Asian culture at a national level. Indeed writers such as Salman Rushdie and Hanif Kureishi had already achieved international recognition and the Tara Arts Theatre Company was, at this point, about to be funded by the Arts Council. Tamasha's founding directors were themselves to be characterized¹ as breakaway members of the Tara Arts; it must be remembered that Sudha Bhuchar and Kristine Landon-Smith did indeed break away from a company which, even when exploring their cultural roots on the Indian sub-continent in a recent show such as *Genesis*², gave importance to two elements which have notably so far been absent from the Tamasha repertory. These were first a form of theatre entirely foreign to the Western stage and, second, references to, or a portrayal of, Asians in East Africa.

As a starting-point from which to discuss what we have termed "cultural adaptation" in the work of Tamasha, this definition by the artistic director of Tara Arts of the three contrasting approaches taken by Asian theatre companies up to now seems pertinent:

The first is to present India to England, using western theatre-forms so as to raise difficult issues of colonial history and the suffering of Asian people. The second is to present a picture of Asia, but to Asians themselves, here using traditional forms and trying to transport the Asian audience back to the sub-continent in a search for roots. The third and perhaps the most delicate is to employ a creative dialogue between the memory of the Asian migrant and modern England.³

Commenting upon these approaches elaborated by Tara's Jatindor Verma, Barnaby King praises the third approach whereby Asian theatre groups develop new forms and aesthetics different from their traditional roots but still "culture-specific". King equally seems to imply that Tamasha does not enter into this category as the Company "has chosen a more naturalistic, westernized style of performance".⁴ This may be so but the question may be asked as to whether Tamasha is not also engaged in "creative dialogue".

¹ See Barnaby King, "Landscapes of Fact and Fiction: Asian Theatre Arts in Britain", *New Theatre Quarterly* 61 (Feb. 2000) p. 29.

² Performed at the Midland Arts Centre, Birmingham, in 2000.

³ Barnaby King, "Landscapes...", p. 29.

⁴ *Ibid.*

The inspiration behind the variations in the corpus already points to a desire to associate largely Asian subject matter and Western forms. This is true of four out of the five adaptations Tamasha has made of other literary or performance sources which will be subsequently analysed. The fifth is the 1998 *Fourteen Songs, Two Weddings and a Funeral* adaptation of the Bollywood film⁵ *Hum Aapke Hain Koun* which keeps the musical form of the original although the latter might in itself be considered as a Bombay version of the Hollywood musical. In the four original plays, Western naturalistic dramatic form predominates with a sharp distinction being made as to the locus: *Women of the Dust*⁶ and *A Shaft of Sunlight*⁷ both take place in the India of today; in contrast *East is East* and *Balti Kings*⁸ are situated in Northern and Central England in the 1970s and the 1990s respectively. However, the Asian subject matter of which we have spoken is characteristic of all Tamasha plays and in each case concerns a tightly-knit community who either live in or originate from India or Pakistan. The “creative dialogue” Verma refers to is certainly not that of the Asian persona dialoguing with other ethnic groups within the locus of the play; White British, African or Caribbean characters are noticeably absent from all Tamasha work with the exception of the White British mother and her friend in Ayub Khan-Din’s *East is East*. The film based on this play further alludes to, although not exploring in depth, Asian-White relations with scenes involving white school-friends and the hair-dressing saloon. What is original in Khan-Din’s play-script is the perspective which will remain the same in his following play *Last Dance at Dum Dum*⁹ (although this is not a Tamasha production): it is from the perspective of the Asian family or community and the problem of how they integrate white members in Britain or how Anglo-Indians can live within the community in India. This aspect may be considered as “culture-specific” although not concerned with the “memory” of a certain culture, but on the contrary emanating from the heart of the present of British-Asian culture.

The whole corpus, whether the adaptations or original plays, deals with the problems of everyday life and inasmuch as these tend to be social rather than philosophical it is easy to understand why the plays are judged as realist or even naturalist. However, this judgment is simplistic in that no easy solution is proposed outright as would be the case in the works of social realism from 1930s U.S.S.R. Most of the plays are perhaps more akin to those produced at Joan Littlewood’s Theatre Workshop in the 1950s in London. Problems of caste, superstition, exploitation, social-climbing, women’s role and situation and the inevitable theme of partition are treated in much the same way as *The Hostage*, *A Taste of Honey*, *Chips with Everything* and *Oh, What a Lovely War* treated the breaking-up of the British class-system (which nevertheless still exists!) and the breaking-up of the British Empire. In the same way as these latter plays were produced with an explosive energy typical of the theatre of times of real change (a comparison might be made with anti-apartheid theatre in 1970s and 1980s South Africa) in Tamasha plays this same energy, often expressed through song and dance, combined with realist almost sit-com situation formulae to give dynamic performances, new in that the plays were an adaptation by an Asian people of a western form.

⁵ For a discussion on the importance of the Bollywood film in Britain today see Satinder Cholan “Hooray for Bollywood”, *The Guardian* (December 2 1999), p. 11.

⁶ Ruth Carter, *Women of the Dust* (London : Nick Hern Books, 1999). Dates of publication in the notes do not necessarily correspond with performance dates given in the text.

⁷ Abhijat Joshi, *A Shaft of Sunlight* (London : Nick Hern Books, 1999).

⁸ Ayub Khan-Din, *East is East* (London : Nick Hern Books, 1997 [1996]).

⁹ Ayub Khan-Din, *Last Dance at Dum Dum* (London : Nick Hern Books, 1997 [1996]). For a more detailed analysis of *East is East* see: Anne Fuchs, “Un exemple de théâtre interculturel : la Tamasha Theatre Company” in *Postcolonial Knitting, The Art of Jacqueline Bardolph*, éd. by Richard Corballis and André Viola (Nice, France : C.R.É.L.A. / Massey, New Zeland : Massey University, 2000), pp. 54–60.

This of course corresponds to Asians adopting a Western life-style in Britain while retaining many aspects of their own culture.¹⁰

At this point it is useful to specify that “cultural adaptation” may be defined in this instance in three different ways: first as has been pointed out, the deliberate adoption of Western theatre form; secondly, the adaptation to modernity, to Western values, ideas and lifestyle in the fable of the play and, thirdly, what might be termed the cultural adaptation of a British (Black or White) audience to an intra-cultural concept. In each definition “perspective” is all-important. To start with theatre form, it is interesting to reflect on the reasons for choosing this particular mode over others. It may be assumed that the theatre is the ideal space for the physical meeting of cultures. The first two plays performed by Tamasha, *Untouchable* (1989)¹¹ and *House of the Sun* (1991)¹² were adapted from novels by authors of Indian origin already well-known in the West. “The Asian experience” that “Tamasha aims to reflect”¹³ was already accessible in Britain to the individual reader of Mulk Raj Anand (1935)¹⁴ and Meira Chand (1989)¹⁵ but only theatre could bring together a multicultural audience and allow them to experience live the problems, joys and griefs of a specific society of the Indian sub-continent. The problems treated in these first two plays, the caste system, arranged marriages, superstition, and the background problems of relations between Hindus and Muslims and partition would seem exotic to a white audience and even to certain British-born Asians. However, the presentation form itself is one that any multicultural Western audience would be familiar with: the realist play which has undergone the transformation imposed on it in the twentieth century by the contact with other media (film, radio and television) so that its traditional Acts and scenes even when so entitled have in fact become the exact equivalent of the film sequence. This was immediately obvious from the 17 scenes of *Untouchable* and the 30 scenes of *House of the Sun*, the latter being divided into 2 Acts probably to allow the audience an interval. However, unlike in a film or television scenario, the first violent climax is reached with suitable dramatic rather than filmic effect in that Rani’s screams echo as the black-out for the interval comes down and the audience is left wondering if she is not undergoing a forced abortion.

In the following play, *Women of the Dust* (1992), the author, Ruth Carter, goes a step further in the new media influences on form. First the audience is treated as a “camera eye” with numerous references in the stage directions to the “focusing”: “We now focus on [...]”, “The focus is now on [...]”, “The focus now centres on [...]” etc. In fact the use of songs to highlight social problems, the introduction of the interval between the two Acts of the play not with a strong dramatic moment as in *House of Sun* but with an address to the audience by the Hawker finishing “India is a very poor country,” and the succession of contrasting sequences which might be considered episodes, undoubtedly indicate the influence of Brecht. This, albeit direct or indirect, was a common enough influence in British theatre from the 1950s onward; it is combined in *Women of the Dust* not only with the “focusing” or the film sequence mode but also with significant allusions to television throughout the text. Moha, a poor construction worker is obsessed with the idea of television; this obsession has an ambiguous function: it nearly destroys Mohan and his family when Mohan is cheated into buying for his chief an empty box, but at the same time

It is a brilliant idea. I’m not a fool, and I’m not a dreamer. Sitting in the dark, telling each other the same old ancient stories, that time is over. (Pointing to TV). There’s a

¹⁰ Cf. Kwesi Owusu (ed.), *Black British Culture and Society* (London : Routledge, 2000), although the majority of texts deal more specifically with Caribbean issues.

¹¹ Sudha Bhuchar and Kristine Landon-Smith, *Untouchable* (London : Nick Hern Books, 1999).

¹² Sudha Bhuchar and Kristine Landon-Smith, *House of the Sun* (London : Nick Hern Books, 1999).

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹⁴ Mulk Raj Anand, *Untouchable* (Bombay : Current Book House, 1953 [1935]).

¹⁵ Meira Chand, *House of the Sun* (London : Hutchinson, 1989).

new story teller and it speaks equally to the rich and the poor... Every person, every nation, it beams down on them equally with wonderful programmes. This storyteller's voice is so magical soon you forget your own mother's voice and she forgets the voices of her ancestors. There are now stories every day. New faces, new voices. Exciting actions...

Besides Mohan, another character alludes to watching television: "There was a programme on TV about your venture"¹⁶ says the contractor to the rich girls who are doing charity work. As far as the form is concerned this cultural reference of the modern world common to Asians of the sub-continent, British Asians and White British is a factor binding together a multicultural audience accustomed to watching British TV.

For the third time Abhijat Joshi's *A Shaft of Sunlight* (1994) is a play situated in India and explores the problems of a Muslim-Hindu mixed marriage. A new direction was taken in 1995, however, with Ruth Carter's adaptation of García Lorca's *Yerma* (1934); not only an adaptation of a Western drama, *A Yearning*¹⁷ was supposed to take place in Birmingham and was first performed at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre where *A Shaft of Sunlight* had already been co-produced and a local success. García Lorca's drama is not essentially realist and it is interesting that this first Tamasha play about Asian Britain should consist of a three-way "translation" with a Spanish canonical text being "translated" into a Punjabi cultural form in the setting of Punjabis "translated" from Asia to Black Britain. At the same time the emphasis is on the "translation" from Spanish to Indian cultural themes which appear extraordinarily close to each other with the tightly-knit community and the importance of child-bearing for the traditional woman confined to the house. Compared to that of other plays, the setting in Birmingham and the cultural adaptation by Asians to life in Britain is almost superficial; there are a few references to *The Birmingham Post*, to Tesco bags, Barclays Bank and Boots talcum powder but otherwise the drama could be that of any childless couple living in any big city. Paradoxically the most English aspect of the play is the language. Lorca's poetic Spanish has been translated into poetic English with no attempt at reproducing idiomatic Asian English. This particular form of poetic prose, it may be suggested, is not Anglo-Saxon in its tone but while recalling other texts by Latin authors such as Lorca, is also akin to Celtic texts by Yeats or O'Casey which have become part of the twentieth-century English canon.

The actual confrontation of Asian culture with that of the White British occurs essentially in two of the latest plays by Tamasha: *East is East* (1996) and *Balti Kings* (1999). The two dramas are set, as previously stated, in the North of England and the Midlands, but what is new is that they could not have been set anywhere else. The theme of trying to bring up children as Muslims in 1970s Salford in *East is East* originates from the time and place and Ayub Khan-Din, as did Hanif Kureishi to some extent in *The Buddha of Suburbia*¹⁸ and his plays and films, draws on his own life experiences to achieve an authenticity of language and situation which makes this work a paradigm of the Black British comedy of manners. *East is East* deals mainly with the personal problems of a Muslim family faced with all the interactions from the British environment contesting Muslim values of education, sex, patriarchy and religion which the father attempts to uphold. *Balti Kings*, on the other hand, although permeated with the same problematic confrontation of values is situated in the workplace of a Balti kitchen. This locus is in itself a creation of Asians in Britain as Balti dishes were originally served from open street stalls in Indian cities and it was only after partition and the massive immigration of Pakistanis to the Birmingham area that the "Balti restaurant" was invented as opposed to the traditional Indian Hindu restaurant which had long been a feature of big cities in Britain. Sudha Bhuchar and Shaheen Khan have written a play where

¹⁶ *Op. cit.* pp. 11, 21, 29, 35, 45, 24 respectively.

¹⁷ Ruth Carter, *A Yearning* (London : Nick Hern Books, 1999).

¹⁸ Hanif Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia* (London : Faber and Faber, 1990).

“cauldrons and karahis, masalas and spices, basmati and rice pudding, garnish the set illuminating this slice of contemporary British Asian life with sensitivity and humour.”¹⁹

These two plays of British Asian life are in stark contrast with the two intervening works *A Tainted Dawn* (1997)²⁰ and *Fourteen Songs, Two Weddings and a Funeral*, so much so that one must question which spectators the Tamasha company is targeting. That *East is East* with its very British flavour (in France the film was distributed under the title of *Fish and Chips*) had universal appeal is proved by the fact of it being turned into a film. It also had a strong appeal for young Black British audiences, Caribbean or Asian, sometimes the product of mixed marriages and often in revolt against the incomprehension of immigrant parents. This sort of identification produced by the mimetic effect on stage of the real world of the audience did not obtain with a work such as *A Tainted Dawn*:

Companies like Tara and Tamasha do crucial work in raising the profile of Asian arts in Britain, but evidence suggests that they have relatively little impact on Asian communities in the regions they visit. Tamasha’s *A Tainted Dawn*, for example, came to the West Yorkshire Playhouse during the Black Theatre Season in October 1997, but played to small, majority white audiences.²¹

This comment does not perhaps take into account the greater success of the play in Edinburgh, London and Birmingham. However, it raises the question of what Black British or even White British audiences expect and appreciate. *A Tainted Dawn*, inspired by short stories by Asians from the sub-continent, mainly related to Independence and the partition of India and Pakistan. It is written from a perspective firmly situated in the historic past of the sub-continent and as such is more firmly distanced from what we have already referred to as “the heart of the present of British Asian culture”. It is also the play (except for *A Shaft of Sunlight*) which most lacks “tamasha” or “spectacle”; even here there are one or two bouts of singing, the sound of Nehru’s speech and firecrackers, but there are no weddings, funerals or formal songs. Perhaps it is no coincidence that the following play was pure spectacle, a musical adapted from a Bollywood film which paid special attention to song and dance, to the rich colour of the costumes and to visual effects of decor and movement in general. At the Birmingham Repertory theatre at least, the house was packed nightly with a 95% Asian Black audience delighted more by the spectacle than the romantic storyline. The impression of watching and physically participating in a Bollywood movie was further enhanced not only by the sharply-raked seating and the flat performance space at the level of the first row but also, by Western standards, the minimum applause at the end which did not, however, mean a lack of appreciation by the highly-excited audience.

British-Asian theatre has most certainly been influenced by Western realism; perhaps more surprising is the fact that the resulting interculturalism has been accompanied by what we have tried to suggest is intergeneric performance work with borrowings from, or utilization of, different multi-media techniques. This factor is not so unusual in the post-modern art world of the West today even if more often associated with an individualistic, “poetic” approach. Tamasha, however, uses the almost naturalistic technique to the same effect as it is used in popular films and television in both the sub-continent and Britain. Ready identification with problems treated (even if the caste system and divisions between Muslim and Hindu could be thought to be of less significance in Britain) is important for the British-Asian audience generally; for the younger, second and third generation immigrants recognition of Asian actors and actresses who have “made good” accords the latter an almost iconic stature

¹⁹ Quotation from website <<http://www.tamasha.demon.co.uk>>.

²⁰ Sudha Bhuchar and Kristine Landon-Smith, *A Tainted Dawn* (London : Nick Hern Books, 1999).

²¹ Barnaby King, “Landscapes...”, p. 29.

whether it be Meera Syal²² in *Goodness Gracious Me* on television or Sudhar Bhuchar and Nina Wadia in the plays of Tamasha.

The naturalistic techniques of Tamasha have nearly always been accompanied with song and dance which are in fact the most traditional aspect of the *mise en scène* of the plays and of their texts: in *Untouchable* the Aarti and other bhajans are sung in the Hindu temple, in *House of the Sun* a mantra is sung at a funeral, in *A Yearning* the Brechtian songs in Spanish are translated into English and at the end of *A Tainted Dawn* Laurie gives explicitly a new version of the Ramayan, a traditional Hindu myth, reconciling in its new version Pakistan and India. Compared for instance with the work of the Tara Arts Company, Tamasha does not go out of its way to emphasize the mythical roots of British Asian culture. The cultural references are interpreted differently by the various elements which make up the audience: for the British Asians there is the pleasure of recognition, for other Black British and White British this becomes the pleasure of the exotic.

With the new millennium in a city such as Birmingham, Balti restaurants, turbanned Sikh bus-drivers and Indian corner shops have become an integrated part of the British scene. More slowly, integration has also come about in the field of culture: British Asian success in the realms of television and radio have prepared the way for the special hybridity of a theatre company such as Tamasha. Whereas the Irish theatre mentioned previously would become rapidly indistinguishable from the English (which is not to say that there is not a recognizable Irish theatre emanating from the Republic today), British Asian theatre contributes not only fresh impetus to popular English theatre, but also, as we have tried to show, the physical presence of the bygone Empire and subtle hints of otherness.

²² Besides her television and film productions Meera Syal has also written two novels *Anita and Me* (London : Flamingo, 1996) and *Life isn't all ha ha hee hee* (London : Doubleday, 1999).