

Assessing G.C. Tongbra's *Taj Mahal*

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Abstract: G.C. Tongbra's *Taj Mahal* is a study in human relationships between Ranimamta and her two lovers Yadav and Rajmohan. The play probes into the life of slum dwellers who live a state of constant migration and utter poverty. Poverty denies man his fundamental human needs for food, shelter and clothing. When he is unable to get it, he is forced to a life of thieving and crime. The central characters in the play being caught in the grip of extreme poverty, become victims of such social maladies.

Keywords: Existential, destitute, subaltern, philanthropy, migration.

G.C. Tongbra, the well known Manipuri dramatist has written some very powerful plays exposing conflicts in the lives of people. He is known to have exposed the anomalous condition in society for man to become conscious of it and rectify the wrongs for a better life. His later existential position led him to centre his attention on man's need to free himself from bondages for a better life. The underdog in society needs to assert his identity and fulfil himself in a world of haves and have-nots. In their quest for identity, the underdogs need to challenge all impediments in the form of conventional morality, law and justice. Some of his popular plays include *Lupa Sana* (Silver and Gold) 1940; *Judge Masabu Jailda* (Jailing the Judge himself) 1940; *Mani-Mamou* (Mother-in-law and daughter-in-law) 1945; *Taj Mahal* (1972); *Ngabong Khao* (The Flesh trap) 1975; and *Changyeng Manja* (Experimental Husband) 1984. *Taj Mahal* has been very successful in presenting his strong views, attacking conventional morality and concepts of justice (Prakash 37). In *Taj Mahal*, the dramatist centres around the relationship between Ranimamta and her two lovers Yadav and Rajmohan. The play opens at dawn at a shack in the slum where, Kebal, a blind man is ready to begin his daily begging trip with his teenaged foster daughter, Ranimamta. Kebal begins to chant the Lord's name: "Hare Krishna, O immortal! Bhagawan, if you've got real ears it's already time you heard us – the hungry and half-clothed wretched of the earth...Are you transformed into earless, eyeless, wood or stone? You're hiding yourself carefully somewhere. For, you are afraid that the beggars of this earth will surround you and strip you bare How evil you are!" (Tongbra 40). As he calls Ranimamta out to take him out, she remonstrates with him as she feels herself a grown up girl to go begging daily. Since the man is dying to have a cup of tea at the tea stall, she leads him out grumbling at her lot. They both exit singing:

You are Kooda, You are Allah/You are Bhagawan/ .../You who can get more of everything/ Destroy us – the cataracts of your eyes/ If you will not, then help up/ With a square meal everyday, if possible (41).

The sequence shifts to Rani's two lovers – Yadav a hotel boy, and Rajmohan, a bus handyman. They vie with each other to marry her. The duo enter into an argument, each boasting about their financial positions. Yadav, is a hotel boy, dressed in a soiled dhoti and a shirt, while Rajmohan is in his stained kakhi pants and a patched up shirt. They argue and insult each other. Yadav claims to have won over the old man Keval, offering him his daily dose of *ganja* to smoke. In gratitude, the old man had promised his daughter to him. Rajmohan, on his part, boasts that he would buy a Tata truck or a car and wouldn't hesitate to run over Yadav, if he ever crossed his path to win Rani's hand in marriage. The sequence moves to the father and the daughter dream of their happiness. They find Yadav getting ready *ganja* for the old man. He tells them how Rajmohan came and threatened to run over him with his truck. "Rajmohan, the driver, came here sometime ago while you were away. He warned me not to show my face around here. He says he was destined to become Rani's husband. He even said that I would be run over by a car or a truck if I stood in his way" (43). Excited, he began to impress upon them with his earnings of thirty five rupees a month. In the next sequence Chitragupta, an artist, has painted a portion of the Taj Mahal on canvas. The stones of a dilapidated minaret are shown as being used to construct several hovels for the homeless. Rajmohan comes in and tells Chitragupta that in his disappointment in hell, he has come there to find a place in heaven. The artist tells him to leave behind all thoughts of poverty and suffering, to dream of something of his choice. Curiously he enquires of his painting. He tells Rajmohan that he would tear down his Taj Mahal to build thousands of hovels for the poor and the place would be given to them to live. Rajmohan couldn't understand how he could destroy something Shahjahan built as a monument to the memory of his beloved Mumtaz. He tells Rajmohan that he can play the role of Shahjahan if he has the spirit of love for his Beghum. He longs to become a Badshah for a while and forget his misery. Meanwhile, Sanerei, a wealthy lady, bedecked with costly ornaments enters, asking the painter to make her life portrait. She notices Rajmohan and asks him about her shawl she forgot in his bus. He confesses his inability to return it to her as he had pawned it off for fifty rupees. The sequence shifts to Rani running out to meet Rajmohan as he whistles for her. He asks her for a knife. When she brings it she is told that badshah Shahjahan and Begum Mumtaz would wed that night – namely himself and Rani. She is curious to know the role of a kitchen knife. He tells her that the peacock throne of Shahjahan would be carved with it. She stands aghast at the turn of events. As Yadav comes to the scene, Rajmohan invites him to join him to go and purchase a car for his wedding. Yadav moves off reluctantly, fearing being run over by Rajmohan. After some time there is a commotion and Yadav runs towards Rani's house imagining a woman shouting "Help! Murder! Help!" Rani tells him that it was the result of mere imagination since he was too much associated with Rajmohan. She tells him not to be afraid of him. When her father comes in and queries, she merely says, "I'm treating a lamb who'd been mauled by a wolf" (48). Yadav suddenly refers to the

lot of Rajmohan who gets stoned without using *ganja* and who constantly talks of “murder and loot, who never cares a whit about his life and who supposes death is a better state than being alive...” (49). As the old man and Yadav drown themselves smoking *ganga*, dacoit Rajmohan appears stealthily with a suitcase in hand full of jewellery and clothes. He hands everything over to Rani who is overjoyed to have such costly ornaments and clothes. They both dress up elegantly. He wears a false beard. He hands over to Rani the shawl of Sanarei, the kitchen knife stained with blood, and over three thousand rupees, asking her to keep them safe. As the girl is so overjoyed and wraps herself around his legs, he utters: “My queen, this is the tax offered to us by our subordinate rulers! Choose any dress you want – wear the jewellery here – these are all yours” (50). He begins to urge her on his deep love for her, which is deeper than the love of Shahjahan for Mumtaz. Their love for each other is proven in the dialogue that ensues:

Rajmohan: Yet it's true my Queen, your loveliness at this moment won't be surpassed by the beauty of Mumtaj in the eyes of Shahjahan – which fact is known only by my eyes.

Rani: If that be the truth, then add a hundred times more to the love of Mumtaj for Badshah but it won't be anywhere compared to this beggar girl's love for her Emperor (51).

The emotional relationship of Rani to Rajmohan prompts her to clasp his hands and kiss them. She confesses how he had made her a queen. He picks up the knife and wipes off the blood stain on it and says: “This blood is of those people whose good misfortune is our fortune, whose blood will ever be the vermilion for our foreheads in all of our marriages” (51). He then goes on to smear his fingertip with the blood on the handkerchief and marks her forehead as if applying vermilion. He goes on to give her a bundle of currency notes as a token of submission from his vanquished enemies. He promises her that he would strengthen his army to be her hero. They exit together like king and queen, and Chitragupta scatters flowers on their way. He wants to know if they have left behind in the world of hell their ideas of disappointment and discontent. Now they are at their heaven where their wishes would be fulfilled. Rajmohan is excited to spend their first few hours of their marital bliss, escaping from the world of poverty and misery that they endured throughout. Chitragupta promises to protect them in their bliss and wouldn't let any one, they do not wish, to enter their heavenly abode. Rajmohan requests the artist to let them know how to find their marital bliss that night. Rani too requests him to conjure up Shahjahan and Mumtaz from their resting places to let them re-enact the depth of their love for each other. “Even though we were not endowed with their might, we both destitutes are still human beings. We hope to love each other as much as they did. Please show these two humble beings their way of life” (53). Chitragupta responds to her plea by telling her that as an artist he is able to bring back anyone from heaven or hell with his prayers. Meanwhile a song is heard and as it ends a sequence from the life of Shahjahan and Mumtaz occurs. It is the tragic scene of Mumtaz's death while she is in her labour pain and the subsequent sorrow of

Shahjahan which gave shape to Taj Mahal. Chitrugupta goes on to speak of his wretched lot. He was brought up by his mother through great struggle after his father was killed in a road accident while working as a road construction labourer. The story of Rajmohan is quite the opposite as his mother was a beautiful woman who co-habited with many men. So, he claims to have had many fathers, none of whom took care of him. The artist comes forward to state their lot as the scum of society: "We are orphans, destitutes, unloved, despised even by death....Taj Mahal was built by the mixture of Shahjahan's tears and the sweat of our forefathers – twenty thousand of them..." (54). Rajmohan responds saying that Badshah only killed and maimed innumerable people. He believed in violence which Rajmohan loved to imitate. Rani expresses her desire to borrow the crowns of the emperor and the empress to indulge in their promises of love to each other. Chitrugupta consents to her demand and would be the witness at their wedding as he says, "Both of you are now joined in an alliance to confront life together, to share both happy and sad moments" (55). Suddenly Rajmohan becomes serious and refuses as he doesn't want Rani to follow him in his life of crime and looting. He returns the crown to the artist to return to the world of people in suffering. As Chitrugupta receives the crowns back, he exhorts them to approach him at his Temple of Art whenever they are disappointed in life. The sequence moves back to the hut where the old man and Yadav are searching for Rani in the night. They cry out calling out her name asking why and with whom she has eloped, leaving behind her old father and lover. Yadav is sure that it is Rajmohan, the dacoit and murderer, who has kidnapped her. He is unable to understand why she ran away with him, abandoning him who had promised to provide her security and a steady income of 20 to 30 rupees a month. The old man assures him that if she ever returned, he would give her in marriage to Yadav.

As they discuss how to handle the matter, Rani suddenly appears along with Rajmohan, dressed in dazzling apparel. They carry a box of sweets and announce that their marriage ceremony was held in the Temple of Art. They fall prostrate, seeking the old man's blessings. Questioning them if they had eloped on their own free accord, the old man requests Rani to seek Yadav's pardon. Rajmohan consoles a disappointed Yadav with the promise of better times to come: "We people are one and the same, we are all destitutes, orphans – whether I take her first or you, it makes no difference...We should remain in one camp. We have to fight with the fortune – inheritors, those who had been fed with gold spoons. In their case, the grandfather's throne goes to the father, after him it passes on to his son, he becomes an emperor, a man of authority! For we destitutes – I am to be followed by you, and you should be followed by another destitute... the chain should not be broken until we destroy the laws, principles, mores of this society, our enemy" (58-9). The old father shouts out in joy, inviting his friends – the beggars, the orphans and the hungry people to share the sweets and *pan* with them. Meanwhile, whistles could be heard with the police Sub-Inspector, arriving with his entire force to arrest Rajmohan. He tells him to surrender like a hero. He

begs the cops not to arrest him that night as he is just married. He promises to surrender the following morning without any ado. But, he is told that the arrest warrant is for looting and murdering a woman besides looting and killing a storekeeper. When Rajmohan demands proof of his crimes, a police dog is released which goes in to the hut and brings out Sanarei's clothes and identifies him as the killer. As everyone is shocked, Rajmohan requests Yadav to take his place and marry Rani. Yadav and Rani prostrate at his feet for letting their dream come true. As they sob, Rajmohan consoles them saying that they should live happily ever looking after the old Keval. A song, being sung at the background, sums up the theme of the play:

O ill-fated bird,/Whither you, whither I!/We did not remain/ even for a whole day./ Now you are stuck/ By the hunter's arrow./ How shall she live/ her heart broken into pieces/ in this world/ full of cruelty?(60).

As Rani writhes in sorrow, Yadav consoles her that it is the nature of the world to cry and laugh. "When winter is over spring arrives, after the rains autumn comes. Rise up Rani, my heart, I am also Rajmohan, I will love you like him...He was a cut-throat dacoit, a murderer, but I am..." (60). But Rani is in no mood to hear him complain about Rajmohan who showed his heroism in saving the poor and destitutes in the slums. She acknowledges his role in fighting society that keeps oppressing to destroy the poor. He alone stood to challenge the customs oppressing the poor. Hearing her attachment to Rajmohan, Yadav apologises for having called him a dacoit. Rani retorts telling him a coward: "... you are not courageous – you happen to be mewing lamb. He was a real wolf – a leopard, how will you wear his shoes?" (61). Yadav pleads her to strengthen him with her lotus eyes to enable him to be extra courageous. Rani invites him to go with her to the Temple of Art to meet her badshah Rajmohan after which they could fix the day of celebration. As they reach the Temple of Art, they meet Chitrugupta who tells them that anyone could become the Badshah. He asks them if they have brought to the Temple of Art something that troubles them. Yadav has nothing to present as a problem, except he wants to win Rani's heart. Rani on her part is bothered about the fate of Rajmohan who had been arrested for murder and looting. She wishes to meet him and talk to him for a last time before he is hanged. The artist promises to bring him to her in the Temple of Art like the way Taj Mahal, on the banks of Yamuna, was brought to the eyes of Badshah, by the artist. The magic takes place and Rajmohan appears in the lock-up. She tries to embrace him, but he recoils back and tells her not to touch him as he would be hanged any time. She questions him if he really decided that the cowardly Yadav should take his place. Speaking in favour of Yadav, Rajmohan tells her, "...the destitute orphans are a family and it is better for them to inherit among themselves. *Sati*, you should be the strength for this cowardly man. You must guide him in the struggle to uproot the enemies" (62). He also tells her to erect two pillars in his memory and fix a bell between them which she and Yadav should ring twice a day in Rajmohan's memory to remind people about him. As Yadav falls prostrate before Rajmohan, he is told to take good care of Rani and to fulfil his mission of

reforming society. He further adds, "Where is the society that'll take care of us – the male and female beggars, the thieves, the liars, the dacoits, the looters? Instead they are always trying to harm us" (63).

The sequence shifts to Rani and Yadav in conversation. She tries to test his courage by asking if he would be willing to do anything for her, including the killing of an evil bureaucrat or a police officer. His reply is that he would do it after much practice in killing fishes and snakes. Annoyed, she sets the condition: "We can't get married until and unless you become a courageous person...Idiot! How shall you be my husband? How could I expect any help from you in challenging such a firm-rooted society, in breaking and destroying their laws and customs?" (64). On his part, he agrees to perform all domestic duties. His immature behaviour drives her to take upon herself to be like a man to fight evils of society. She would become a consort to all those corrupt immoral bureaucrats. "I'll try to finish them, I'll be their travel partners – I'll even stay at their residences overnight... In order to avenge the death of Rajmohan and to reform society, you have to buy a good pistol secretly...or snatch one from a police officer..." (64-5). Though Yadav gets shocked with her demands, he is willing to do anything for love of her. The old man asks Rani if Rajmohan was hanged in the night. She cries her heart out mumbling, "...in this world full of partiality, the trial of a friendless destitute orphan can be done in no time" (65). Asked about her future with Yadav, she tells him that they would be married after he completes his errand as desired by Rajmohan. In the final sequence, Yadav and Rani, ring the bell at the Temple of Art and exchange garlands to declare themselves as man and wife. The play is set in the background of the slums where the protagonists living in a state of constant migration, undergo problems due to unhygienic conditions. Living in constant poverty, they are easily prone to crime and evil practices. The question that puzzles one is - why do the subaltern groups continue to remain perpetually thwarted? The elite groups have 'remained dominant devoid of the will and ability to transform society, while the counterthrust from subaltern groups was perpetually thwarted or subalted by elite domination' (Sen 207-8). The play is a study on poverty that breeds crimes and immorality. Poverty denies man his fundamental human needs for food, shelter and clothing. When he is unable to get it, he is forced to a life of thieving and crime. The central characters in the play being caught in the grip of extreme poverty, become victims of such social maladies. It is a fact that poverty coexists with affluence. Hence if measures are not taken to eradicate extreme misery of the poor, our society will continue to be haunted by criminals and anti-socials like Rajmohan. According to World Bank's Poverty Estimates, 1.4 billion people live at the poverty line of \$1.25 a day or below (Shah). Being confronted by ever increasing global poverty, it is imperative on the part of the rich nations and peoples to contribute towards eradicating it. Peter Singer, Australian philosopher and humanist opines that philanthropy and charity to the poor is imperative for anyone to live a moral and ethically good life. He argues that affluent societies have the obligation 'to choose to give' a larger

amount of their income to help the poor. Several international organisations and NGOs are using charity to build institutions and create job opportunities for the poor to give them independent and sustainable life (Guzeldeniz). The fate of the poor and the subaltern people world over should go beyond voluminous documentation and debates. Tongbra's *Taj Mahal* is a superb social criticism and tirade against the existing social mores and practices.

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