

Creating in Shifting Sands: Tanvir's *Agra Bazar* and Wu's *Li'er Zaici*

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Abstract –

Through a comparative study of Habib Tanvir's *Agra Bazar* and Wu Hsing-kuo's *Li'er Zaici*, this research project explores how both artists' distinct cultural contexts shaped their theatrical creations amid rising nationalism. Three key questions inform the project: How did the multilingual structure in Tanvir's play subvert South Asia's embedded social stratification? How did Wu achieve his creative defiance of traditional Chinese *jingju* theatrical conventions in his adaptation of *King Lear*? What insights does a comparison of the two texts and of their creators' strategies yield about intercultural adaptation and artistic resistance? Both artists worked in art forms steeped in artistic traditions shifting in prominence due to the political changes happening around them, both artists were adept in adapting western literary texts to local audiences, and both experienced degrees of artistic dismissal or professional headwinds from political shifts occurring around them. Applying theoretical frameworks of linguistic resistance, intercultural adaptation and cultural materialism, this research aims to understand the artists' subversive approaches in their response to social stratification and cultural practices in their respective regions. This project contributes to broader discussions of cultural adaptations and forms of artistic resistance, providing new insights into the ways these artists navigated and reshaped the cultural landscapes they engaged with.

Keywords – linguistic resistance, intercultural adaptation, cultural materialism, Urdu poetry, *jingju*, *nacha*, *Agra Bazar*, *Li'er Zaici*

Résumé —

À travers une étude comparative d'*Agra Bazar* de Habib Tanvir et de *Li'er Zaici* de Wu Hsing-kuo, ce projet de recherche explore comment les contextes culturels distincts des deux artistes ont façonné leurs créations théâtrales au milieu de la montée du nationalisme. Trois questions clés orientent le projet : Comment la structure multilingue de la pièce de Tanvir a-t-elle subverti la stratification sociale enracinée en Asie du Sud ? Comment Wu a-t-il réussi à défier de manière créative les conventions théâtrales traditionnelles du *jingju* chinois dans son adaptation de *King Lear* ? Quelles perspectives une comparaison des deux textes et des stratégies de leurs créateurs apporte-t-elle sur l'adaptation interculturelle et la résistance artistique ? Les deux artistes ont travaillé dans des formes d'art imprégnées de traditions artistiques dont l'importance évoluait en raison des changements politiques autour d'eux. Tous deux étaient habiles à adapter des textes littéraires occidentaux à des publics locaux et ont connu divers degrés de rejet artistique ou de vents contraires professionnels dus aux changements politiques qui les entouraient. En appliquant des cadres théoriques de la résistance linguistique, de l'adaptation interculturelle et du matérialisme culturel, cette recherche vise à comprendre les approches subversives des artistes en réponse à la stratification sociale et aux pratiques culturelles dans leurs régions respectives. Ce projet contribue aux discussions plus larges sur les adaptations culturelles et les formes de résistance artistique, offrant de nouvelles perspectives sur les manières dont ces artistes ont navigué et remodelé les paysages culturels avec lesquels ils se sont engagés.

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1 – Introduction

Through a comparative study of Habib Tanvir's *Agra Bazar* and Wu Hsing-kuo's *Li'er Zaici*, this research project explores how both artists' distinct cultural contexts shaped their theatrical creations amid rising nationalism. Three key questions inform the project: How did the multilingual structure in Tanvir's play subvert South Asia's embedded social stratification? How did Wu achieve his creative defiance of traditional Chinese *jingju* theatrical conventions in his adaptation of *King Lear*? What insights does a comparison of the two texts and of their creators' strategies yield about intercultural adaptation and artistic resistance? Both artists worked in art forms steeped in artistic traditions shifting in prominence due to the political changes happening around them, both artists were adept in adapting western literary texts to local audiences, and both experienced degrees of artistic dismissal or professional headwinds from political shifts occurring around them. Applying theoretical frameworks of linguistic resistance, intercultural adaptation and cultural materialism, this research aims to understand the artists' subversive approaches in their response to social stratification and cultural practices in their respective regions. This project contributes to broader discussions of cultural adaptations and forms of artistic resistance, providing new insights into the ways these artists navigated and reshaped the cultural landscapes they engaged with.

My primary objective is to argue that the geopolitical shifts happening around these creators, namely rising nationalism and (in the case of *Agra Bazar*) growing linguistic divisions, led to these artists devising subversive strategies in their approaches to theatrical creation. My secondary objective is to deconstruct the artistic genres Tanvir and Wu were working in, to illuminate their respective approaches.

Agra Bazar —

Habib Tanvir (1923-2009), an iconic South Asian theatre director (also a playwright, poet, actor and film director), is known for pioneering a new theatrical idiom in post-Independence South Asia, where his works are recognized as classic masterpieces of the Indian stage. In the Indian popular imagination, Habib Tanvir's reputation is synonymous with multilingual folk theatre traditions, remediating contemporary social issues of urban South Asia's 1950s and 60s. In 1959, he founded the Naya Theatre, a professional theatre company where he directed productions for five decades, leaving a lasting legacy that continues to influence Indian theatre today (Malick Refashioning 132-134). Raised in Raipur, Chhattisgarh (then Madhya Pradesh), Tanvir's formative years were immersed in *nacha* folk theatre. He furthered his studies in English literature and theatre at the University of Nagpur and Aligarh Muslim University in India as well as the Rada and the Bristol Old Vic theatre schools in London. His early career encompassed roles as a film journalist, radio producer, and actor in Bombay, alongside participation in political leftist cultural organizations like the Progressive Writers' Association (PWA) and the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) (Malick Refashioning 132-134). The IPTA collective played an important role in shaping modern Indian theatre, and was influential in shaping Tanvir's theatrical approach through the organization's aim of creating socially relevant theatre to address concerns of the common people— using art as a tool for social and political change. At the time, Tanvir had already been questioning power structures and cultural-colonial impositions impacting the theatre world.¹ *Agra Bazar* (1954), which borrows structural elements of *nacha* folk theatre, blending it with modern theatre, reflects this ethos by bringing the stories of ordinary people to the forefront. The play defies categorization, combining comedy, historical

¹ Tanvir had begun to develop a critique of the imposition of western theatrical conventions embedded in South Asia, saying: "Gradually I came to recognise that we cannot really go far by imitating the West ... this kind of imitative theatre, with its severe limitations, could not help us to be creative, to do anything new or startling, or to interpret plays in a manner that is really meaningful [here]" (Katyaj Inclusive 24, Tanvir Villages 32-33).

drama, folk elements and character elements, as Tanvir's personal eulogy for the poet Nazir Akbarabadi (1735-1830). Due to its meld of Urdu poetry, folk tunes, the dominant languages (Hindu, Urdu), in addition to a local indigenous language (Chhattisgarhi), and the use of improvisation amongst a mix of educated actors, illiterate folk and street artists within the creation process, *Agra Bazar* has proven to be malleable to frequent reinvention, with new incarnations emerging from Tanvir's traveling theatre company every decade since — with changes in dialect, characterization, structure and story events to better mirror the realities of contemporary audiences² (Malick Introduction 116-117 Wessler 296). Tanvir recognized how such local theatre works were propelled through a multitude of oral traditions, and often were only commodified through interaction with urban theatres, artistic or literary circles and subsequent translation to the dominant languages — Hindi, Urdu and English (Orsini 66-72). *Agra Bazar* remains a seminal work in modern Indian theatre, exemplifying Tanvir's innovative approach to playwriting and staging, while capturing the spirit of two historical eras, with continued relevance in its portrayal of cultural and linguistic diversity and its critique of socio-political dynamics.

Set in a busy market of competing food vendors in a city long in economic decline, *Agra Bazar* illuminates the cultural, political and economic polarities percolating within the market's atmosphere between the decline of the Mughal empire and the colonial rise of the British East India Company. Bustling with vendors selling traditional snacks, the sesame-seed *laddoo* (an ancient Indian sweet), *kakri* (a type of cucumber native to north India) and watermelon, their calls to passersby, fruitless in their urgency, bring a sense of desperation to the market atmosphere. Much of the stage is the bazaar's transient space — vendors squatting, public

² In the documentary, *Ga Ke Neon Theatre, Mor Naon Habib*, during a theatre performance preamble, Tanvir says certain characters' speak in what is "often called 'substandard language' ... [which] are rich repositories of our culture. You will not have difficulty following it because 'to come,' 'to go,' 'to eat,' 'to drink,' these verbs generally remain the same in Hindi. There is [only] a slight change in how you use them..." (Deshpande Gaon 00:07:30-00:08:47)

processions, *fakirs* (religious ascetics), beggars, *hijras* (transvestites), corrupt policemen, street performers, a *madari* (street entertainer with tamed monkeys) — or where regular people interact, while shops line the back of the stage (Tanvir *Agra Bazar* 39, Malick *Refashioning* 145, Wessler 305). According to the stage directions, the soulful sound of a woman singing a *ghazal* is accompanied by the rhythmic beats of a *tabla* (a percussion instrument in Hindustani classical music) and the melancholic tunes of a *sarangi* (a bowed, short, three-stringed instrument). The play is loosely based on the life of the Urdu poet Nazir Akbarabadi (1735-1830), who used a range of poetic forms (*nazm*, *ghazal*, *shahr āshob*, etc) with an intention to resist elitist modes of artistic expression.³ Tanvir employed a variety of poetic styles from Akbarabadi's body of work to capture the essence of the era, to illustrate the linguistic diversity of the marketplace, as well as the social and political issues relevant in his time (Tanvir *Agra Bazar* 39, Malick *Introduction* 114-115, Malick *Refashioning* 145, Zaidi 166-67, 170, Dalmia 260). Above the paan shop, the residence of prostitutes connotes the underlying complexities, portraying a social fabric that is as diverse as it is stratified. The bookseller, engrossed in his financial accounts, sharply contrasts the surrounding hustle, denoting the intellectual elite's detachment from the realities of everyday life in the bazaar. Despite Akbarabadi's visual absence throughout the play, Tanvir's portrayal of him through his poetry highlights the contrast between the common people's affection and the elite's disdain for him, as exemplified through characters like the kite-seller and the bookseller. The kite-seller's shop is punctuated with colloquial dialogue in several languages to highlight the social class divides, in contrast to the bookseller's shop, where poets, critics and historians gather to speak in a more ornate literary vernacular (Tanvir *Agra Bazar* 39, Katyal 27-29, Zaidi 166-167, Malick *Refashioning* 143-145, Wessler 295). "Without a linear storyline, the action [is]

³ Nazir Akbarabadi would respond to almost anyone who asked, even a fruit vendor saying, "*tarboosh pe khuchh likh dijiye* (please write something in praise of our watermelon)," and write a *ghazal* they could sing to sell their fruit. "Even today, Nazir's poems can be found on the lips of mendicants, vendors and others in the streets and bazaars throughout India" (Katyal 27-28).

punctuated with Akbarabadi's songs ... as vendors, prostitutes, beggars jostle each other, commenting on the powerful and politics of the day" (Dalmia 260). A *madari* (street entertainer) and his monkey perform a short skit in the market, covering 200+ years of South Asian history—spanning Iranian, Afghan, Mughal and Jat conquests, British colonial rule and a famine induced by conditions imposed by the British East India Company. In an overzealousness to drum up an audience and income, the *madari* drives away customers, which escalates into a childish verbal sparring match between himself, the *kakri*-seller, the *ladoo*-seller and the melon-seller all vying for sales (Tanvir Agra Bazar 41-44). "As a[n] historical play, it somehow catches the spirit of social and aesthetic changes in an early phase of British imperialism, plays with it and translates its meanings to our age" (Wessler 296, 307). *Agra Bazar* is known for its unique blend of theatrical and poetic elements, a broad canvas to reflect the rich cultural and literary tapestry of the time. The play's opening scene is rich in detail, setting the stage to delve into the socio-economic disparities, creating parallels between conditions of the post-Mughal era (Akbarabadi's era) and a post-British rule India, the time when Tanvir created the play (Khan 544). *Agra Bazar* not only mourns the cultural shifts happening, but also mocks intellectual elitism amid a widening economic divide, capturing the essence of social changes during two eras of South Asian history.

Li'er Zaici —

Wu Hsing-kuo (1953-), artistic director, co-founder and lead performer of the Contemporary Legend Theatre in Taipei (1986-), is known for his contemporary fusions, adapting western literature into the *jingju* theatre tradition (also known as the Peking Opera or Beijing Opera), in addition to film and television roles for which he has received numerous

awards and nominations. His formative years were spent at the Fu-Hsing Chinese Opera School in Taipei from the age of eleven, training in the *wusheng* (male role), and studying traditional Chinese theatre at the Chinese University of Culture in Taiwan thereafter. Upon graduation, he became a principal dancer with Lin Hwai-min's Cloud Gate Dance Theatre Company and a member of the Lu Kuang troupe, a Taiwanese military theatre group, both expanding his repertoire and garnering numerous awards for his performances. He later received a scholarship to study in New York under a mentorship. In 1986, he cofounded the Contemporary Legend Theatre in Taipei with his wife, Taiwanese choreographer Lin Hsui-wei (Quillet 7, Li 211, Joubin Buddhist 249-250). Wu later became known in regional theatrical circles for a personal-political fallout with Chinese theatre master and former mentor, Master Zhou Zhengrong, which led to a lack of formal recognition as a qualified *jingju* performer by Beijing opera practitioners, critics and audiences. An indigenous theatrical form originating from the geography surrounding Beijing, *jingju* melded elements of other theatre forms over centuries, was endorsed by the imperial court, eventually rising to a stature of representing China's national theatre, alongside China's recent economic rise. The growing association between *jingju* and Chinese national identity became a consistent headwind in Wu's theatrical career as a Taiwanese artist practicing a Chinese theatrical art form, at a time when deviation from nativist policy tropes was increasingly institutionally frowned upon in Taiwan. The evolution of *jingju*, historically supported by the imperial court and now emblematic of Chinese national theatre, situated Wu's work and theatre company within a complex geopolitical interplay of cultural preservation and innovation – between China, Taiwan and the broader influences of globalization. *Li'er Zaici* (2001) is described as a bi-product of Wu's own personal-professional crisis, offering a meditation on selfhood – questioning what underpins one's identity. "One of the most striking features of this

play is its allegory of the multiple and conflicting roles a person might play throughout their life” (Joubin Buddhist 250). In *Li'er Zaici*, a one-man show, Wu performs nine characters from *King Lear* — the King, his three daughters, the Fool, Kent, Gloucester and Gloucester's two sons — in addition to playing a dog and himself confronting his own personal-professional demons, an underlying layer to Lear's relationship with his children. As Wu wrote the work for himself to act and direct, “his script became a practical blueprint for performance and delved much more deeply into the protagonist's inner world than would a normal *jingju* script ... allow[ing] the meaning to arise from the stage technique.” To differentiate the characters, Wu “exploited the conventionalized system [where] every *jingju* character type has its own distinct singing voice, style, mode of acting, gestures, body movements and steps” (Li Who 197, 204). This served both the narrative complexity while demonstrating his mastery and reinterpretation of traditional conventions. *Li'er Zaici* gives Wu's personal interpretation of a context where traditional cultural hierarchy has lost its dominance, a commentary not only on *King Lear*, but also on *jingju* as an established theatrical form in response to shifting cultural landscapes (Liang 132). The play deviates from traditional boundaries imposed on actors in *jingju* theatre, to explicitly showcase Wu's performance range, stage techniques and abilities in dance, martial arts and in song. Performers' roles were narrowly categorized, and it was rare to attempt roles outside a particular specialty, however, in *Li'er Zaici*, Wu spanned six *jingju* character types: *wusheng* (the male warrior), *laosheng* (the singing older male role), *jing* (the painted-face role), *qingyi* (the singing female role), *huadan* (the vivacious female role), and *chou* (the clown) (Li Who 196). Melding these structures allowed the exploration of psychological realism and complex intergenerational themes the Shakespearean tragedy inspires. “Psychological realism, a feature ... Wu attributes to Shakespearean tragedy, expands the repertoire of *jingju* performance routines ... using an aging

father figure and recalcitrant younger generations” to reimagine the tale of his theatrical career (Joubin East Asia 66). Wu’s aesthetic approach remains atypical in traditional Chinese theatre, which “appreciates assimilation, balance, symmetry and neatness,” while using elaborate embellishment in costuming and makeup for identifying a character’s status and nature (Barba 244, Li Who 199). The play opens with the key scene of Lear in the storm, immersing the audience in a turbulent emotional and meteorological climate which sets the tone for the rest of the play, followed by selected excerpts in Act II focused on intergenerational conflicts, sibling rivalries, and themes of loyalty and betrayal from *King Lear*. Wu condenses Shakespeare's complex narrative, reducing the number of characters, simplifying the plot, while experimenting with the solo theatrical form (non-existent in Chinese theatre), and restructures the play into three acts, naming each act (as is typical in Chinese opera): *The Play* (Act I), *Playing* (Act II), and *The Player* (Act III) – where Act I is a tragedy, Act II is a comedy, and Act III is a personal reckoning (also a tragedy). Wu's performance is marked by a physicality which brings the solo theatrical form to life, playing Li'er, a military general, revealing the division of his kingdom amid his declining mental state, before removing his costume to shape-shift into a regular *jingju* performer (regretfully, penitently playing a version of himself). The transformation from a powerful general to a *jingju* performer conveys internal and external conflicts (Li'er's and his own). With “fast and slow paces, large strides and minced steps, turns, jumps and somersaults, integrated with stage techniques of moving his long beard and wide sleeves,” precision characterizes all aspects of his performance — how the layers of costuming, wig and waist-length beard flow with his movements, aesthetically drape and shimmer, while he plays various roles in high-platformed shoes (Barba 255, Li Who 197). On a near empty circular stage, lighting effects create thunderstorms, blowing fog or a cloudy mist across the stage, in one

instance with paper snow. “Instead of the harsh sound of a gale played by the *xaio* or vertical flute, a soft breeze was conveyed by a *sheng*, while scattered leaves drifted down from above the stage” (Li Who 209). The natural elements evoked through lighting and sound effects are aesthetically credible to render Li’er unconscious at several points in these early scenes. Their dramatic intensity – flashes amid thick rolling fog with Li’er in silhouette – reveals a vast landscape beyond the circular platform, with towering, rocky pillars at its edges, which later fall across the stage to denote a natural, ocean-side environment as the backdrop to later scenes. The manner in which the circularity of the stage, the lighting design, sound design and craggy rock elements conspire is quite ethereal, seamlessly denoting environmental shifts, and punctuating the characters’ emotions and actions throughout the play.

Methodology & theoretical framework —

This section outlines the theoretical frameworks guiding my analysis of the broader socio-political and cultural examination of the plays. My exploration of *Agra Bazar* and *Li’er Zaici* applies three theoretical concepts — linguistic resistance, intercultural adaptation and cultural materialism.

Linguistic resistance as a theoretical concept refers to the use of language as a tool for challenging dominant power structures and ideologies, and cuts across the fields of linguistics, sociology and cultural studies. Rooted in various theoretical terrains, the concept draws on Michel Foucault’s work exploring the role of discourse in maintaining power structures.

Foucault’s work “shows power is not concentrated in a single place such as a state apparatus, but is instead ubiquitous and at once visible and invisible, present and hidden” (Martin Rojo 78). The concept of linguistic resistance has been influenced by postcolonial theory, examining how

language was a tool of colonial power and how it has been used to resist that power. Critical theory and linguistic anthropology have also contributed to understanding how language shapes and is shaped by social structures and power dynamics. By demonstrating Tanvir's use of dialects and colloquial language, this analysis illuminates how *Agra Bazar* questioned the linguistic hierarchies (existing and newly forming) in post-Independence, post-Partition South Asia. My analysis of *Li'er Zaici* uses linguistic resistance to explore how body language (as a form of semiotic resistance) forms a key component in the play's narrative construction – exploring how gestures and body language were used as signs and symbols (visual and linguistic) to convey, provoke and subvert meaning through Wu's use of the *jingju* genre.

The theoretical concept of intercultural adaptation refers to the process by which an artistic work integrates elements from multiple cultures, involving dialogue between cultures, where elements from each are respected, understood and often transformed to create something new, transcending the boundaries of an individual culture. My analysis focuses on how each play transformed its source material to fit a changing cultural context – how *Agra Bazar* bridged cultural and temporal divisions while connecting traditional Urdu poetic forms with contemporary socio-political themes, and how Tanvir adapted the poetic works of Nazir Akbarabadi, turning poetry into performance and melding it with indigenous theatrical styles. For *Li'er Zaici*, the focus is on how Wu adapted *King Lear* to a one-man show while bridging the Shakespearean text with the theatrical conventions of the *jingju* genre, how thematic elements, character arcs and dramatic structures were aligned, or its boundaries blurred within the genre's artistic conventions.

Cultural materialism, influenced by early Marxist theory, is a theoretical concept anthropologists adopted as a framework to explore how technology, resources and economics

shape cultural conditions and other social elements — religious beliefs, social structures, political systems and artistic expressions. Applying a cultural materialism lens to the analysis of these two texts gives a socio-economic and political perspective on the conditions depicted in the plays, and the times in which the plays were created. This analysis examines how *Agra Bazar* depicts and critiques the socio-political and economic realities of post-Independence, post-Partition India, its parallels to the post-Mughal era when Akbarabadi wrote his poetry, and how material conditions and class structures are represented. For *Li'er Zaici*, applying a cultural materialist lens enables an exploration of how the play's development and thematic content was influenced by shifts in Taiwan's cultural policies, and how Wu chose to address the political dynamics between China and Taiwan impacting his career.

2 – Literature Review

Agra Bazar —

While several authors analyze various aspects of Tanvir’s work and approach, applying theoretical lenses of linguistic resistance, intercultural adaptation and cultural materialism is a departure from the existing discourse.

In “Translating Habib Tanvir’s ‘*Agra Bazar*’ into German: Footnotes on Intercultural Dimensions from a Translator’s Workshop,” Wessler argues that direct translations of regional literature for South Asian consumption were not necessarily inaccessible to the German audience, and how the linguistic-political turmoil in *Agra Bazar* potentially holds some relevance in contemporary Europe, particularly the German experience. “In our age of shifting identities from the national to the European, it can even be argued that German identity is much more related to language than to territory” (310). Wessler draws loose parallels between India and Germany, contrasting German nationalism with that of France or Great Britain, whose nationalism he describes as politically determined, while citing Germany’s as culturally determined, since Germany was historically divided into small states ruled by independent feudal lords — this holds parallels to South Asia’s regional histories and the rupture surrounding the Urdu language, mirroring the widespread publishing of German literature throughout Europe prior to WWII (312). In addition to supporting my arguments, Wessler’s comparative analysis of audience reception and translation of the text in India and Germany demonstrates how far reaching Tanvir’s meld of *nacha* and modern theatrical conventions were received.

In “‘To be More Brechtian is to be More Indian’: On the Theatre of Habib Tanvir,” Dalmia’s analysis centres on how Tanvir creatively appropriated Brecht in adapting Chhattisgarhi folk theatre to the urban stage. This article explores Tanvir’s early years with the

IPTA, its fertile ground for experimentation and his approach to *Agra Bazar*, refined prior to Tanvir's European experience and exposure to Brecht, who became a source of inspiration and a toolbox for Tanvir. "Brecht's theatre was ... an ally in the evolution of a resistant theatre, providing vital support in the reuse of techniques [and] modes of presentation" (255). While resemblances exist between the episodic construction and assemblages between Tanvir's and Brecht's plays, "[Tanvir] had shown that it could be a meaningful exercise to interpret the classical through the prism of the present, using the liveliness and irreverence of folk theatre practice" unique to the South Asian context (255, 264, 267).

In "Refashioning Modernity: Habib Tanvir and His Naya Theatre," Malick chronicles the evolving political terrain, historical timelines and affiliations shaping Tanvir's socio-aesthetic predilections, and analyzes how Akbarabadi's body of work aligned with Tanvir's own political views. All of Tanvir's work "raised and interrogated major issues and concerns of the time. It was a measure of the political poignancy of his theatre that he was repeatedly attacked by rightwing (mainly Hindutva) forces." Tanvir was against the post-colonial project of modernity, which he saw as flawed. It failed to give adequate attention or importance to India's regional languages, cultural forms, traditions, and lifestyles (135-136). While *Agra Bazar* is now a much-loved play, it was not well received early on, largely due to its political stance. With in-depth analyses of *Agra Bazar* and *Charandas Chor* (his most well-known plays), Malick applies a cultural studies lens and engages in an aesthetic analysis of Tanvir's theatrical career and works, characterizing his approach by saying, "Tanvir's fascination with the 'folk' was not motivated by a revivalist or an antiquarian impulse. It was prompted instead by an awareness of the tremendous creative possibilities and artistic energies inherent in these traditions" (Malick Refashioning 170-171).

In “Presenting the Past: How Habib Tanvir Contemporizes the Past in his play *Agra Bazaar*”, Khan discusses Tanvir’s development of the play and several scenes exploring “the social and political situation of the twentieth century through historicizing the eighteenth century” (544). Khan compares the socio-economics of the time and attacks on the city of Agra depicted in the play to the loosely parallel conditions during Partition. The *shahr āshob* opening the play is cited as portraying the widespread unemployment characteristic of both eras, and the discussion of events Mir witnessed – including “a river of blood flow[ing] through Delhi with human heads floating like bowls” – likens these scenes to the large-scale death and decline the newly independent India experienced due to Partition (1544-46).

In “Text and Context: Exploring Folk Genres in Habib Tanvir’s *Charandas Chor*,” Mecwan analyzes how Chhattisgarhi dialects were interwoven with folklore and folk music in Tanvir’s *Charandas Chor*, applying both cultural studies and narrative construction lenses to Tanvir’s work. Mecwan describes how Tanvir’s approach was a combination of folk tunes and new songs written by folk poets, mostly set to traditional Chattisgarhi melodies — using choruses, chants or phrases from traditional folk material, juxtaposed with dialogue written specifically for the play, with little of the dialogue formally scripted. While Hindi was the language Tanvir worked in and the official language of the state, most folk actors were not conversant in Hindi, using it impeded creativity, so in the early years Tanvir switched to Chhattisgarhi, their medium of expression (487-489). Although this article is focused on *Charandas Chor*, the approach to narrative construction that Mecwan analyzes was already present early in Tanvir’s career with *Agra Bazar*.

In “Habib Tanvir’s Naya Theatre: Towards the Revival of Folk Theatre,” Mishra applies a cultural studies lens to Tanvir’s approach, discussing the difficulty in bringing these productions

to Delhi at the time, where audiences had little understanding of the Chhattisgarhi language and its dialects (628-36). Mishra describes the challenging work environment, since theatre productions featured Chhattisgarhi performers speaking only in their mother tongue (as musicians, singers, dancers, actors, jokers or comic actors), in performance rituals using minimalist stage, lighting, set design and props. “The life experiences and socialization of the urban, intellectual, liberal poet ... and the underprivileged, struggling villagers who find it difficult to trust an outsider, could not have been more different ... it was not a smooth path, several issues rose, plenty of wars and battles... but there was care and mutual respect” (630-631).

In “Habib Tanvir: Upside-Down Midas,” Deshpande describes Tanvir’s persona as “a citizen of the world, borrowing, reading, soaking up influences indiscriminately ...[how] whatever he touches loses its sheen, it becomes rough and turns to Chhattisgarhi” (3888). He discusses how the actors in Tanvir’s theatre company zigzag around the country several times a year by road or rail, living out of suitcases and trunks, and describes various members of the troupe, several of whom began working with Tanvir’s Naya Theatre in 1958, and continued with the theatre company long after retiring from previous jobs. Deshpande captures a picture of Tanvir at the age of 80, ascribing to him the attributes of his father, a Pathan from Peshawar, from whom Tanvir has retained “the arrogance and quiet determination of those sturdy tribesmen. Urban and sophisticated, pipe in hand, he is a man of sartorial panache, charming and wickedly funny ... sage-like and forever immersed in work, he sizes people up instantly. Grand patriarch, benevolent dictator...” (3888). Deshpande chronicles the political work and activism throughout Tanvir’s career as an outflow of his persona.

Li'er Zaici —

Applying the same three theoretical lenses – intercultural adaptation and cultural materialism and linguistic resistance (primarily in the form of semiotic resistance through body language) – this analysis is a departure from the existing discourse on Wu's *Li'er Zaici*.

In “Rerouting *King Lear* in a *jingju* actor's reminiscence: Wu Hsing-Kuo's *Lear is Here*,” Chang politically contextualizes Chinese adaptations of Shakespeare and intercultural theatre, tracing the evolution of such adaptations through significant political epochs/movements from the early 1900s, how intellectuals (via drama clubs) adapted western works to promote liberal views and modernization for the purpose of stimulating socio-political changes in China, and how theatrical Shakespearean adaptations correspond to Chinese cultural politics at a given time (1103-1104). “From 1950s to 1970s, studies on Shakespeare plays [in China] conformed to the ideologies of Marxism driven by Ideological State Apparatuses ... [throughout the 1950's] there were only three ‘acceptable’ Shakespeare plays — *Romeo and Juliet*, *Twelfth Night*, and *Much Ado About Nothing*, either romances or comedies.” Due to strict censorship, theatre artists avoided plays with “any ambiguous implication of political criticism” (1104). Chang contextualizes the shifting political and cultural landscapes that shaped these adaptations and discusses how Wu “rooted and re-routed” Shakespearean plays, *jingju* artistic conventions and role types to align the characters in *King Lear* to his own professional crisis — repurposing layers and transgressing traditional boundaries for his own personification.

In “A Buddhist *King Lear* in Taipei: *Lear is Here* by Wu Hsing-Kuo (2001),” Joubin provides an English translation of Wu's play, with an introduction aligning Wu's formative years to the layered identity and familial conflicts in *King Lear*, while also discussing how regional tensions between Taiwan and China further fragmented Wu's identity (Joubin Buddhist

249-250). These alignments, further complicated by these regional tensions, make Wu's dual identity as a Taiwanese *jingju* actor particularly fraught. "Despite his Taiwanese identity, Wu has been ostracized because he professed *jingju*. He sees parallel[s] between his dual identity as a *jingju* actor and a citizen of Taiwan, and Lear's irreconcilable identities as a king and a father" (250). With *Li'er Zaici*, the Contemporary Legend Theatre Company "returned to the world stage after a three-year hiatus ... shut down 12 years [after its founding] due to internal disputes and repeated rejections" (250). Joubin's analysis reveals how personal and political narratives intertwine in Wu's adaptation.

In "Wu Hsing-Kuo — Subversion or Innovation?" Eugenio Barba discusses Wu's approach to theatrical construction, describing it as a form of artistic "collage" informed by Wu's range of training (in traditional *jingju* roles, contemporary dance, western theatrical training, etc). "A carefully designed artistic collage is in many ways more difficult than a work created in a conventional style, because it demands a greater range of skills from the artist" (242). Wu restructured the canonical play for the purpose of exposing his real self to the audience — a post-modern approach to theatre that contravenes *jingju* aesthetics and abstraction. "The prime significance of *King Lear* to Wu was that it provided a means of analyzing his insecurity about his identity and purpose in life" (243, 250). Barba deconstructs three of Wu's plays as works of theatrical collage (*The Kingdom of Desire*, *Li'er Zaici* and *Waiting for Godot*), examining the relationships influencing the development of these works. In discussing audience reception, Barba says of *Li'er Zaici*, "It required knowledge of *King Lear*, Wu's personal story and Taiwan's political situation for audiences to fully appreciate the production. Such an intimate treatment of a [western] masterpiece aroused resistance from some who felt both Shakespeare and the aesthetics of [*jingju*] theatre had been lost in Wu's personal story" (258). Barba's insight

into Wu's use of *King Lear* in exploring his insecurities about identity illuminate various aspects of Wu's experimental approach.

In "Navigating Between Shakespeare and *Jingju*: Wu Hsing-Kuo's *Li Er Zaici*," Liang discusses Wu's participation in the tutor-pupil system of *jingju*, equating it to an official inheritance of an artistic lineage. "Yet, Wu eventually refused the role set by the tradition ... a decision not unlike Cordelia's utterance of 'nothing'" — a similar rejection of the social contract Lear asks his daughters to validate (139). The *King Lear* dramatization of breaking a familial-social contract, mirroring Wu's personal-professional relationship, remains abstract and open to interpretation, allowing audiences to see parallels between Wu and several characters he played in *Li'er Zaici*. Liang further discusses how intercultural performances are characterized by different assemblages where multiple, even widely conflicting viewpoints can co-exist. "[T]wo sets of deterritorializations of the traditions of *jingju* and Shakespearean performance, can be observed from the assemblages created by Wu's *King Lear* ... [how] these productions are also imbricated with various kinds of political agenda that may invite [multiple, wide-ranging] readings. In this respect, an intercultural Shakespearean production is inevitably political, even though it may not appear to be dealing directly with current political issues" (137-141). Liang's analysis examines how the play acts as a site of cultural and political negotiation.

In "'Who Is It That Can Tell Me Who I Am?' / 'Lear's Shadow': A Taiwanese Actor's Personal Response to *King Lear*," Li analyzes (seemingly) all aspects influencing Wu's development of *Li'er Zaici*, in addition to decisions made in employing different *jingju* schools for various character types, and his deviation from *jingju* conventions for the purpose of overlaying his own personal commentary on tradition and hierarchy (familial, cultural,

theatrical). According to Li, Wu realized “his ambition to project his own individuality onto the *jingju* stage was stifled by the requirements to conform to its strict [theatrical] conventions” (211). After training for the male warrior role throughout his teen years (acquiring skills in body movement, martial arts and acrobatics), Wu chose to expand his artistic scope by training with Master Zhou, who recognized Wu’s athleticism and ability to sing was a rare combination. “Zhou created new arrangements of some plays from the traditional *jingju* repertoire in order to present Wu’s rare abilit[ies] to sing and perform in martial arts simultaneously” (211). Li discusses how the interpersonal conflicts which arose are to be anticipated when any practitioner attempts to contemporize an established theatrical genre, however, he argues the “dispute with Master Zhou was much more traumatic” due to their disciple-master relationship. Their closeness was further intensified by Wu, whose father had died just after his birth, and who viewed Master Zhou as a father figure. Li describes Wu in a meeting in 2003 as “still deeply troubled and obsessed by this master-father image,” despite two years passing since Zhou’s death (212).

3 – Language and social stratification

Poet: You are attacking a centuries old tradition of great Persian and Indian masters. In which other culture can you find a thing as beautiful as a *ghazal*?

Companion: I am not disputing its beauty, only commenting on its limited scope.

Poet: What you cannot write about in a *ghazal*, you can always say in a *quasida*.

Companion: Besides encomiums for kings and rulers, what else can you write in a *quasida*?

Poet: But the *mathnavi* allows you the freedom to write about anything you please (Tanvir Agra Bazar 55).

This debate between two unnamed characters in *Agra Bazar*'s market highlights the constraints around Persian and Urdu regionally significant poetic forms at the time— the *ghazal*, the *qassidah*, the *mathnawi*, *nazm* and the *shahr āshob*.⁴ Urdu has a long, rich tradition in lyric poetry, with the *ghazal* at its core. In contemporary Urdu poetry, *nazm* and the *ghazal* remain two predominant forms. *Nazm* is a general term encompassing all poetry, distinguishing it from prose — all poetic forms, including the *ghazal*, fall under the category of *nazm*. However, *nazm* is also viewed as a modern form of poetry without strict rules of rhyme or rhythm, known to accommodate experimental approaches and to offer a creative malleability not afforded the *ghazal* poet (Faruqi & Pritchett 111, 114, 116, 120). The origin of the term *ghazal* has its roots in the Arabic term for “spinning” (or being spun), an abstraction for speaking amorously or of love themes.⁵ The Arabic *ghazal* had initially spread to Africa, Spain and Persia, where the Persian *ghazal* evolved from the 8th century until its rise in the Urdu-speaking world from the 17th century onward. Following Persian invasions across South Asia from the 16th century, the use of Urdu was nurtured through Indo-Persian cultural interactions to such a degree the *ghazal* flourished in court patronized musical arts during the Mughal era, in experimentation with

⁴ The *mathnawi* is a long narrative poem often used for epic poetry (heroes, historical events, moral and spiritual themes), predominantly in Persian. The *qassidah* is a long mono rhyme poem (longer than a *ghazal*, shorter than a *mathnawi*), with stronger roots in Persian. The *qassidah* was traditionally used for praise of rulers/noble persons, moral and religious advice or expressions of a moral, philosophical or social nature. The *shahr āshob* varies in form and usually focuses on the social, cultural or political decline of a city or civilisation, and has a stronger association to Urdu poetry (Tanvir Agra Bazar 108-109).

⁵ Dating back to the 7th century, the *ghazal* had evolved from one of three pre-islamic *qassidah* poetic forms, the *nasib* (known as erotic, love poetry).

musical forms (such as *maqam*, *dastgah* and *raga*), becoming imbued in other cultures “through Sufi practices, political migrations, Parsi theatre performances, and individual explorations” (Meddegoda, Zaidi 170-171). Prosodic structural elements of the *ghazal* (*sher*, *beher*, *radif*, *qafiya*, *matla* and *maqta*) made it unique in comparison with other poetic forms as it spread eastward, giving rise to an evolution in musical traditions, predominantly within Muslim cultures across the region⁶ (Meddogoda, Zaidi 170-171). With its literary prominence and institutional use, Persian had become the dominant language of the Mughal empire, while Urdu was increasingly endorsed in the imperial capital, Delhi. “Urdu literature, with all its elegance and refinement ... went hand in hand with the political and military accomplishments of the great Mughal empire” (Petievich 99). *Agra Bazar*’s interwoven tapestry of Urdu poetic forms have historically risen and fallen in prominence with the rise and fall of empires. Tanvir used these poetic forms in his depiction of the decline of the Mughal empire and the corresponding decline of Persian learning and culture, to illuminate the contextual realities experienced by everyday people in *Agra Bazar*’s market. The characters frequenting the booksellers shop “are literate and aware of the introduction of English education, arrival of the printing press” and compilation of literary translations and their English publication at Fort Williams College — founded to school British East India Company officers in regional knowledge bases.⁷ Within the declining

⁶ The *ghazal* is a short poem comprised of rhyming couplets (called *bayt* or *sher*). In Urdu, a *ghazal* typically consist of between 5-15 *sher* (or *bayt*), end with the same rhyming pattern (AA BA CA DA), have the same meter (*behr*), and specific rhyme and refrain rules (referred to as *qafiya* and *radif*). Each *sher* forms a self-contained unit with a single idea independent of the others. *Ghazal shers* need not have a common theme for continuity, usually maintained by an abstract thematic or tonal connection throughout to ensure poetic cohesion. The first two rhymed lines (*ashaar*) of the first *sher* (*matla*), are called *misra-e-ula* (first line) and *misra-e-sani* (second line). In the *matla*, the first two lines (*ashaar*) both must contain the *qafiya* (rhyming pattern) and *radif* (a refrain word, phrase or suffix the second line of all subsequent *shers* must end in). The last *sher* in a *ghazal* (*maqta* or *maklasá*) usually includes the pen name (*takh-ul-lus*) of the author, where layered meanings often simultaneously refer to both author and idea contained in the *sher* (Meddegoda, Zaidi 170-171).

⁷ Fort William College, established in 1800 in Calcutta (now Kolkata) by the British East India Company, was intended to create a class of officers knowledgeable in Indian cultures, languages (Hindi, Urdu, Bengali, Persian and Sanskrit), law and administrative systems, and was viewed as a means of cultural imperialism under the guise of engaging with local customs and languages. Its role in the development and standardization of several Indian languages, most notably Urdu and Hindi, supported both translations and original works, and influenced the direction of these languages in ways that narrowly aligned with colonial objectives.

economic landscape, they begin to see new possibilities in these developments, marvelling at how Sanskrit, Urdu, Persian and other languages were now taught in this new institution, along with an intention to hold *mushairas* — all subtle suggestions of a shift towards a rising British colonial public sphere across South Asia⁸ (Malick Refashioning 145, Tanvir Agra Bazar 57, Wessler 309-310). A hint of melancholy permeates the bookseller’s shop, mourning the demotion of classical literature South Asia had become acclimated to for centuries, with “an inherent fatalism in their reasoning ... [as] their sympathies are with a bygone era” (Wessler 310). This scene situates the space Urdu poetry occupied relative to the emerging colonial elite, and also places Akbarabadi’s poetry on a lower social rung – particularly poetry (written as jingles) to support market vendors advertising their goods – a stark departure from the “ornate diction of Persian court poetry” (Dalmia 260).

The *shahr āshob*’s poetic form dates back to the early 18th century, after Delhi was invaded by the Persian king, Nadir Shah in 1739, rising as a poetic form depicting a society falling into ruination. “*Shahr āshob* poets, in order to express their shock and to understand the turn of events, devoted much attention to the themes of social, cultural and religious decay” (Petievich 100). Initially defined as a localized response, Urdu scholars in more recent times have challenged this definition, in part citing Akbarabadi’s widening use of the form, to describe the broader human condition in such times. The poetic form is known for its credible depictions of everyday life in cities, and has been used as a source of historical and sociological analysis⁹ (Petievich 78).

⁸ “Conversing through *ghazal* verses ... was a trend among nobles and aristocrats in Mughal India. Special events known as *mushaira* brought together an exclusive audience of poets and aspiring nobles [for] sharing knowledge and performance of Urdu *ghazal* poetry. This event was like a symposium where *shayars* (male poets) could present their *ghazal* compositions to the experts and [exchange knowledge and] feedback” (Meddogoda).

⁹ “The *shahr āshob* is of both literary and historical value ... [due to] the special status enjoyed by poets in Mughal India. They were allowed much freer expression than were many of the clerks and counters who kept official records. Largely immune to censorship, their ruminations on the internal causes of and contributions to the empire’s decline still live in the text of their poems, while they may have been erased from official records, if indeed they ever appeared there at all” (Petievich 101).

All around— only suffering, deprivation
 Who should one weep over, who should one mention?
 The times are barren of any sustaining breeze
 And the tree of life withers, without a single leaf.

Jewellers, traders and other wealthy gents,
 Who thrived by lending, are now mendicants;
 The shops are deserted, dust on counter and scale,
 Desolate shopkeepers wait like captives in jail (Tanvir Agra Bazar 38-39).

This *shahr āshob* excerpt at the beginning of *Agra Bazar* illuminates the socio-economic landscape of the era; how the Mughal empire’s decline impacted people in the city of Agra (in now Uttar Pradesh), whose golden age was during the Mughal era as one of the empire’s capitals. For three hundred years, Agra flourished as a centre for arts, commerce, religion and architecture (Agra Fort, Sikandra and the Taj Mahal were built in this era). This decline had caused a power vacuum leading to regional kingdoms vying for control of Agra, before it came under the control of the Marathas prior to their defeat by the British in the Second Anglo-Maratha War (1803) — leading to further expansion of the British East India Company’s territorial holdings across South Asia. The Empire podcast discusses the growing realignment of the elites in northern India at this time, describing an end to 600 years of the Muslim elite — encompassing rulers, civil servants, military, a cultural Persian dominance in language, literature and the arts, etc. “Persian [was] the language of high culture in the way Sanskrit had been in ancient India, but now everyone [needed] to speak English”— in documents, in courts, for all Indian civil societies under the control of the British (Anand & Dalrymple Between 0:03:29-0:04:18). Amid the widespread plunder and anarchy, Urdu poets fled Delhi, Lucknow was emerging as a literary centre, and the decline of Urdu poetry was already underway (Katya Inclusive 29).

Book-seller: You are right, these are turbulent times. When I look at it, what I see is not the Mughal Empire but a big, powerful lion being attacked by hundreds of cats and dogs. See it wounded and helpless, vultures and other birds of prey have also gathered to tear it to pieces. And the lion has neither the leisure to moan nor the luxury to die (Tanvir *Agra Bazar* 52-53).

The metaphor of the lion torn apart by small domesticated animals speaks to the scale of British intervention as well as the grandeur and power of the Mughal empire at its height, and its reticence to die, a sign of its lingering resilience. Encompassed within this transition of empires is the audience anticipation of a transition in British governance (from company intervention to state intervention), as the British East India Company and their growing control of former Mughal territorial holdings became dissolved into institutions under British government control (in 1857) just a few decades later. *Agra Bazar* is situated in 1810 (with Akbarabadi at the age of 75) to lend insight into this economic atmosphere of the era. In several interviews and a preface to the play's first edition, Tanvir discusses how "it was possible to reconstruct the entire socio-cultural history of that period based on [Akbarabadi's] work, [how it was] difficult to fully appreciate his poetry without its political and social context" (Katyal Inclusive 28-29, Tanvir *Agra Bazar* 14, Khan 1545-46). This socio-political landscape (a recently defunct Mughal empire) was timely for Tanvir, as it held parallels to the atmosphere of the decline of the British empire in post-Independence, post-Partition India—the era in which Tanvir wrote this play.

Orsini makes several linguistic delineations of the decades leading up to India's independence from Britain (1947) — how English was now the language mediating all things foreign (and infusing the literary) in South Asia where, for the most part, Hindi housed the nationalistic discourse, subordinating Urdu until post-Partition, when it became the national language of Pakistan, then becoming further systemically suppressed in India (Orsini 66-72, Zaidi 158). Across several sources, Tanvir describes how the geopolitical and linguistic

environment of the time impacted the play, the challenges posed in an atmosphere where Hindi was evolving, strengthening India's nationalistic culture, and how Urdu was not only falling out of favour, but also began to be misused and misunderstood despite a symbiosis between the two languages, having emerged from the same dialect ¹⁰ (Malick Translator 32-33, Zaidi 159). Due to significant differences in how the Mughal and British empires ruled, the widening political gulf between Urdu and Hindi became the outcome of agendas ingrained in institutions to facilitate British colonial imperialistic needs. Some centred on regional knowledge acquisition, or simplifying the languages to conform to western norms, eventually leading to divergences in the regional knowledge bases running through the languages — a British institutional influence dating back to the 1880s (Zaidi 159-163). The imposition of a language is a form of domination when symbolic of nation and encompassing social classes, ethnic groups, regions, colonial powers, etc. This imposition intertwined with rising political tension has often escalated to bloodshed, social discrimination and the extinction of languages (Martin Rojo 80). The more recent tumultuous political divisions in South Asia, then fully embedded in the region's linguistic hierarchy for over a century, erupted around India's Independence and Partition, just as Tanvir was experimenting with the elements infused in *Agra Bazar*. At this point it became a necessity for Tanvir to pioneer approaches in linguistic resistance amid the disintegration of political and cultural hierarchies concretized under the British, which in the face of widespread unrest could no longer serve. An issue debated, adopted and resisted in the 1940s and 1960s was a need to

¹⁰ Tanvir says of the political-linguistic divide at the time: "I resent the emasculating of one of the rich languages of the country by politicians, who did not give a home to Urdu, not one state, not one city, not even one *mohalla*, though Urdu was the spoken language of a vast region, extending from north to south. Urdu was not the language of Muslims alone, but the people comprising both Hindus and Muslims. Among those who nurtured Urdu prose and poetry, were not just Muslims but also eminent Hindu writers" (Katyal Inclusive 96).

return to South Asia's roots, to preserve and rejuvenate India's cultural heritage.¹¹

While Tanvir integrated several folk forms, *nacha* was the predominant form used, with a consistent structure.¹² Performed late at night and lasting until dawn, a *nacha* production comprised four or five skits, each forty to fifty minutes in length, and loosely held together by a thematic narrative. The troupe consisted of ten to twelve performers who relied on comedy and satire in their commentary on village matters, conveying messages of evil in society, superstitions, untouchability, social issues, etc. "An entire show would be put up with stories, skits or incidents, in dialogue loosely connected through song and dance. They would add, delete and improvise according to the need of the hour" (Mecwan, Dalmia 24, *Nacha*). "Language, worshipping practices of the local deities, agricultural patterns, legends, myths and heroic exploits" fed the folk performing arts, which also had a tendency of liberating performances from Brahmanical control and caste hierarchies¹³ (Singh x). Regional folk theatres share several commonalities: an epic approach to storytelling, usually abounding "in songs, dance, pantomime, improvised repartees, imaginative movement, slapstick comedy, stylized acting and even acrobatics," and denote location change by movement or dialogue rather than set changes (Tanvir Villages 37). Tanvir argues that the key difference to classical Sanskrit drama rests in the improvisational skills of the folk theatre, its stock situations and plots, its spontaneous

¹¹ In describing India's cultural policy in 1974, Tanvir says, "considering that this vast subcontinent, still mostly agrarian, represents a multilingual people, still by and large illiterate... [t]he elitist orientation of our cultural policy does not take into account this fact. It ignores sizeable areas of the country alive with millions of people speaking numerous tongues. The people of these rural regions, rich in their cultural heritage, have so far been largely deprived of education. Worse might follow if with the spread of education in the countryside, they are robbed of their culture" (Tanvir Villages 32).

¹² Aside from a brief period in the 11th century, when there was a decline of Sanskrit tradition, which splintered into regional vernacular folk art forms, there remains a gap in the documentation of north Indian folk theatres from the eleventh to mid-eighteenth centuries. "A depreciation of North Indian folk theatres under British colonialism is connected with the overall devaluation of Indian folk performances as primitive representations, which were considered useful only as pieces of anthropological curiosity ... They baffled even the most enlightened European critic who found in them nothing but a jumble of disorganised and disparate elements and thus rejected them as theatrical performances devoid of any dramatic merit" (Singh 7, 10).

¹³ Most folk arts did not "qualify as exotic in ethnological/anthropological terms and hence escaped the attention of social scientists or colonial officers to the extent that details of some of these arts practiced until a few decades ago are also not available. In many cases, the authentic texts of very popular performances are not available ... [as they were not] commit[ted] to paper — a fate common to all oral traditions" (Singh xi).

malleability towards audience mood or temper while satirizing timely events.¹⁴ Folk performers were known for efficient memorization skills, “a natural by-product of [a] predominantly oral culture” (Mishra 630, Tanvir Villages 37, Mecwan, Nacha). Conveyed largely through Chhattisgarhi dialects, *nacha* are traditionally unwritten, improvised performances— neither the words of songs nor the dialogues are fixed.¹⁵ The melodies, however, were derived from folk tunes, linguistic or vocalised norms. In researching the market language for *Agra Bazar*, Tanvir describes finding historical documentation of local market vocalizations for a music score, how “the sounds of Old Delhi, the sellers, the vendors ... all have musical calls; there’s a book [outlining] who speaks in what way, who calls out in what manner, [a]nd then you go to Old Delhi and hear this language. A lot of what I heard ... has gone into *Agra Bazar*. Therefore it has that vigour” (Dalmia 261). Tanvir integrated songs sung in the fields (at harvest time) or during rituals (in temples, death songs, marriage songs, etc) — melding choruses, chants or phrases from traditional folk material in contrast with dialogue written for the play, from which the performers would improvise (Mecwan 487-489, Mishra 631). The goal was to transform the urban theatre through the melding of folk forms, rather than the other way around. “The idea was not to establish urban hegemony over rural art forms; it was rather to expand the urban to meet the rural and transcend ... the estrangement that had set in as a result of colonial cultural and social policies” (Dalmia 256). Two key objectives remained important to Tanvir: 1) solutions to social issues were not to be served to audiences, but resolved together with them, and 2) even in impromptu performances, prioritization was on aesthetic qualities derived from folk practices.

¹⁴ It is often debated whether folk theatre predates the compilation of the *Natyastra* with evidence lacking either way. Bharata Muni’s *Natyastra* forms the most comprehensive theoretical knowledge on dramatic art and performance theory related to Sanskrit theatre, through treatments of various arts rooted in classical Indian theatre (music, dance, song, poetics and aesthetics of theatre). Its premise is arguably “to clarify the vision of theatrical drama in India as a source of religious illumination” (Kumar 219).

¹⁵ Chhattisgarh historically has a pattern of minor kingdoms, with royalty from junior branches of major ruling families to the north, who maintained independence from larger centres of ruling power. Despite being centrally located, Chhattisgarh was primarily under the political control of northern India (Flueckiger 5).

Tanvir was aware that he was bound by the limitations of the urban imagination. He sought to overcome these limitations by evolving various strategies. For one, he contributed the stories, taken either from the folk reservoir or the traditional classic stock, cautiously questioning the feudal values inherent in these. But the dialogues and scenes were improvised in interaction with the [Chhattisgarhi performers]. The possibility of striking a false ‘folksy’ note could thus be ruled out” (Dalmia 256).

Tanvir saw how folkloric narratives were amenable to traveling across regions, borrowing elements, adapting themselves locally, where the twisting of a folktale can be viewed as a literary device, able to consistently serve up a timely socio-political perspective ¹⁶ (Mecwan, Wessler 302, Nacha). In Flueckiger’s fieldwork on Chhattisgarh indigenous performance genres and folklore narratives, she notes the ways in which Oriya and Chhattisgarh castes interact in border areas in dialects and oral traditions (at a crossroads of linguistic and performance traditions), creating significant narrative differences from the Chhattisgarh heartland just a short distance away¹⁷ (Flueckiger 14, 23). It is this aspect of *nacha* performance, refined in its adaptation to various locales over time, when melded with modern theatre, that helped to bridge urban-rural, socio-economic and linguistic divides. The multilingual, multicultural approach that Tanvir pioneered in *Agra Bazar* not only subverted the contextually embedded social stratification, but served to anchor the work in *nacha* theatrical conventions as a foundational strategy – grounding the work amid an unpredictable shifting political landscape. Indigenousness often functions as a transnational entity in political decolonization movements, permeating regional, national and

¹⁶ In his early days, Tanvir began to “put together professional actors and lay actors from villages in the improvisation of small sketches on social issues like poverty, unemployment, *chawl-dwellers* [tenement housing], political corruption. The plays were not announced as such, they were intended to be perceived as after-job political happenings for mill workers ... intended to lead immediate discussions on how to take political action”(Wessler 302).

¹⁷ In 1961, the area comprising what is now Chhattisgarh had a population of 9.15 million (based on updated census numbers). In the urban-specific census data, Chhattisgarhi as a mother tongue, decreased from 85% of the population in Raipur district (area surrounding the capital) in 1901, to 54% in 1961, while Hindi grew to 31.6% claiming it as their mother tongue (a predominantly urban trend) and Oriya with 8.8% of the population. Flueckiger notes, a key element relating to the strength of the Chhattisgarhi cultural ethos is underpinned by the proportion of the population designated as scheduled castes and tribes (roughly 15% of pop. in Raipur district in 1961). “Members of these tribal castes living on the Chhattisgarh plain [were] mostly cultivators or agricultural labourers, [had] acquired caste attributes, and [had] been integrated into the local caste hierarchy” (8).

community contexts, shaped by various tensions in negotiation with myriad of entities (colonial, global, national, regional, etc), while also arising from the needs and sentiments within indigenous community dynamics (Lane and Mikiyama 300). In examining how power is negotiated, there is a need for some recognition of how it reaches “the very grain of individuals, [how it] touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives.” Such discourse, creative or otherwise, becomes a political action, with an intent towards productions which either negates or legitimizes power (Martin Rojo 78, 89, Mecwan). South Asia’s shifting social stratification had already been interwoven into: 1) the poetic forms used in *Agra Bazar*, 2) Akbarabadi’s use of these forms to capture the popular imagination in his time, and 3) the shifting prominence of the languages (Hindi, Urdu and Chhattisgarhi relative to English) within the play’s context and the audience’s reality. In a political environment where the linguistic hierarchization was changing alongside shifts in the political hierarchization, the malleability of *nacha* artistic conventions in accommodating a myriad of perspectives, and immediately adapting to audiences, allowed Tanvir’s troupe to rely on its versatility to shift with the times.

In this chapter, I have reflected on how *Agra Bazar* exemplifies and advances our understanding of artistic approaches to linguistic resistance and intercultural adaptation. Tanvir’s use of Chhattisgarhi dialects, mixed with urban and rural colloquial language, acts as a form of artistic resistance during a period of hegemonic rupture in South Asian history, while re-asserting the value of marginalized voices. “Recognizing resistances to linguistic inequality, hierarchization, linguistic domination and exclusion ... not only allow[s] us to understand what mechanisms of power are at play, [but also] to understand how these instances of social and discursive domination take place” (Martin Rojo 82). Such decolonization attempts demand

recognition of colonial impacts, knowledge (including linguistic hierarchies) and new discourses which “affirm reformulated individual and collective identities” (Martin Rojo 82). These choices, exercised through *Agra Bazar*’s narrative and aesthetic construction, demonstrate a conscious resistance to the ingrained colonial-linguistic hierarchization, by reflecting the cultural and linguistic tapestry of the region and its communities.

4 – Body language through *jingju*

In 1785, before the development of *jingju*, a commentator divided existing music/theatre into two categories: the “elegant section” (*yabu*) ... supported by the Qing court; and the “flowery section” (*huabu*) ... vulgar theatre popular among commoners. During the next hundred years, the competition between these rival theatres saw the flowery section win over the court and the educated class, leading to the success of the new genre: *jingju* (Li Jingju 13).

Jingju came of age from the 17th century onward, when the Manchus from China’s northeast were able to take over the entire country, establish the Qing dynasty (1644-1911), and expand China’s territory. Culture continued to flourish during the 18th century under the reign of the Qianlong Emperor (1735-96), which saw expansion of the *xiqu* into 300 different styles of regional theatre. Most began as small-scale regional folk theatres, several evolving into larger-scale urban genres. Differing in dialects, music, instrumentation (amongst other elements), these regional theatres held similarities in narratives, acting styles and costuming. Wandering theatre troupes would absorb artistic elements from one region to another; however, aside from the *kunqu*, most regional theatres were viewed with disdain by the elite. Throughout the 18th century, popular regional theatres (*pihuang*) experienced a further resurgence with the decline of the *kunqu*, and towards the end of the century in northeast China, *jingju*, a prominent regional *pihuang* genre, became established around the Beijing area (Mackerras 33, 35-36). Several emperors were known to be important patrons of theatre, and the patronage of the Manchu court was significant as it brought *jingju* into being.¹⁸ Palace performances not only influenced *jingju* as a genre, but also commercial theatres in the region. The Qianlong Emperor (1711-99) and the Empress Dowager Cixi (1835-1908) were the most important royal court figures in the history of *jingju*¹⁹ (Li Jingju 36).

¹⁸ “The palace also imposed numerous restrictions on drama ... [meanwhile] peasant uprisings, wars with the Western powers, individual emperors’ preferences and concerns about security of the inner court, changed the palace drama system several times” (Li Jingju 36-38).

¹⁹ Under Empress Dowager Cixi (1835-1908), “not only had the scripts to be censored and corrected in advance, the performers

A key division in Chinese theatrical subject matter was between *wen* (civil) and *wu* (military). “‘Civil’ items are about domestic matters, family life, marriage and love affairs [whereas], ‘military’ items are about battles and wars ... [with] fighting represented by ... complex gymnastics and skillful catching of spears” (Mackerras 40). During the 19th century, a shift was seen between *wen* (civil) to *wu* (military) stage productions around Beijing (alongside the rise of *jingju*), propelled by a growing public “thirst for equality before the law. Thematically, *jingju* became much more male-centred, with ‘military’ dramas predominating.” Narratives shifted from love to polarities of “loyalty versus treachery, courage versus cowardice, strategy versus deception and overcoming tyranny” (Mackerras 41). The *King Lear* text combined this division in subject matter, arguably allowing Wu creative license to blur boundaries in role types and other artistic conventions, while staying true to the Chinese theatrical history related to *jingju*. His semiotic tool box (gestures, movements, facial expressions, mime/pantomime, dance, acrobatics and martial arts) made his performances unusually diverse in narrative and emotional expression across a range of *jingju* character types. Wu’s basic training of the *shǒu* (hands), *yǎn* (eyes), *shǔn* (body), *pò* (steps), *fǎ* (gestures), each required approximately 500 repetitions to master the movements (Quillet 10), and “since different movements [could] be combined, *jingju* conventions permit an almost infinite variety of sequences to be choreographed within the form’s stipulated boundaries” (Li Who 201). Wu’s deviation from prescribed boundaries, distorting and melding them with other art forms within his physical articulation of the characters from *King Lear*, questioned the traditional *jingju* framework while introducing new depth to the

also had to submit a performance text, noting clearly what kind of costume, makeup, dance and acrobatic sets would be used. Cixi often had such a text on the table in front of her while watching the show, if an actor made a mistake he would be punished afterwards. If she was made happy, the rewards were generous ... Meanwhile, public theatres were influenced by the style of the palace drama through the professionals who performed for both ... the extravagance of palace performances featuring fireworks, complicated stage mechanisms and beautifully embroidered costumes or finely made headdresses showed professionals how much the material side could help with the *mise-en-scène*, although no theatrical troupe or public theatre would be able to afford anything like it ... through performers, meaningful and dynamic exchanges took place between the palace drama and the earthier theatre for commoners, and this became the catalyst for the growth of *jingju*” (Li Jingju 39-41).



Fig. 1. Image series of Wu playing Li'er show the costuming, makeup and gesture contributing to Wu's use of body language (Wu 0:05:40 - 0:10:10).

portrayal of Shakespeare's characters. This use of body language was a form of semiotic resistance to rigid artistic conventions, as Wu's intended use transgressed boundaries of *jingju* role types and the usual confines of spoken monologue.

Intermingled within the overhead lighting was a fog (shifting in colour with the character's mood changes), combined with falling powder creating vertical lines above the stage space — accentuating colour shifts, altering the visual perception of space, while amplifying details painted on the circular floorboards, and within the colour palette of Li'er's costuming and

face paint. The traditional pattern-detailing with wide draping water sleeves punctuate Li'er's movement to the percussive drum beats. His attire evoke a decorated military standing, yet his movements, amplified by motions in the costuming, negate his social standing. The white wig, waist-length beard and headdress amplify the shaking movements of his head, evoking a crazy old man, once decorated with accomplishment, yet now no longer possessing his wealth.²⁰ "Wu's enactment of the mad king [is] rendered with masculine angular movements and deep voice. Howling and weeping, he laments his daughters' betrayal and loss of his kingdom and power. For a moment, in a Brechtian 'silent scream' he plucks his own hair and beard" (Chang 1108). "The sequence employ[s] movements derived from *jingju*, [traditional and contemporary] dance, *nō*, Japanese *jūdo*, Chinese martial arts and daily life" (Barba 255). In early scenes, the original *jingju* steps of the *wusheng* role type are usually used to convey an elderly official's happiness; however, Wu distorts this, choreographing movements to convey Li'er's madness, "[f]luctuating wildly between nostalgia and distress over his current plight" (Li 199, 200). Auditory changes and visual natural elements (ie. scattered leaves, paper snow), complement the portrayal of Li'er's psychological breakdown – deepening the play's thematic exploration of nature and madness. Physical signatures of Wu's performance are far more prominent than the vocal signatures. At one point when Li'er stumbles, he begins "turning his eyeballs from side-to-side and then up and down, gradually accelerating these eye movements to a frantic pace" before falling to the ground (Li 200). Wu's movements, choreographed to traditional percussive drum beats, bring further drama to every shake, swing of his arms, twirling his body in a crazy dance accelerating in pace, before he falls to the ground, momentarily unconscious.

²⁰ Mastering the use of water sleeves is a key part of a performer's physical training with costumes. The sleeves are used to punctuate and to convey interior emotional states. Audiences are familiar with their range of movement and can expect changes in the play based on certain movements of the sleeves. "Beard work" in Chinese opera refers to the skillful manipulation of the beard — tossing it in the air, grabbing it in dramatic poses, blowing it outwards to convey various emotions (Wang-Ngai & Lovrick).

King Li Er: My Shoes. My child?
 No, no, no. I have no child.
 ...
 Where is my child?
 Oh, my child, even though you are my child.
 There is no place for you in this world.
 ...
 Whoa! Hold on there, I have unfinished business.
 The thunder from heaven shocked me wide awake.
 Impious daughters enrage heaven and earth!
 (Joubin Buddhist 251-252)

When he awakens, he takes off a platform shoe, throws it behind him, begins looking for his child, grabs his shoe, cradling it like a beloved object, before declaring he has no children – demonstrating his fluctuating connection to reality in his roles as father and king. Stilted movement and slight shaking to the clanging of the music over time, amplify his descent into a state of near insanity. Wu chose to begin his adaptation with Lear’s madness in the storm as the emotional intensity and psychological tension could be heightened through stage imagery of uncontrollable forces of nature: cataracts, hurricanes, fires and thunderbolts. His identification with Li’er is encapsulated in a monologue in Act I, where the performer and the character “often expressed identical feelings and became one person” (Barba 256, Li Who 201). In an interview, Wu describes his writing approach:

I combined Lear’s lines with lines from other characters as long as I felt they helped illuminate Lear’s situation. My gut feeling was that Lear is a hysterical, stubborn old man who does not speak much. He lives in his own world. He ostracizes himself and cannot accept the presence of ‘reality.’ I used dancing, running, and even birds to satirize such an unreasonable old man. He has no function in the ‘real’ world. However, he would not step aside (Joubin Interview).

Wu’s view of Lear also reveals a mirrored view of his former mentor. The emotional intensity is heightened by monologues blending personal convictions with those of his character – connoting his deep identification with Li'er, while adding a layer of autobiographical depth to

the performance. Wu's deviations in monologue and distortions in body language aid in embodying themes of power, loss and identity. This physical articulation became a form of semiotic resistance in its portrayal of traditional power and authority, arguably offering a more nuanced and vulnerable exploration of leadership and legacy.

Role types in Chinese theatre date back to the Tang dynasty (618-907), evolving over time within regional theatrical forms, illuminating the rich tapestry of diversified character archetypes (specific to the genre).²¹ In *jingju* there are 4 key role types: *sheng* (male), *dan* (female), *jing* (painted face) and *chou* (clown). Each role type is further subdivided into character types where their stage elements reside in a complex, hierarchically coded system (referred to as *chengshi*). *Loasheng* (old male) are mature men, such as statesmen, *wusheng* are military men or male warriors, while *xiaosheng* (young men singing falsetto) represent figures such as scholar lovers. The *qingyi* (singing woman) are demure and dignified, the *huadan* (vivacious woman) are light-hearted and often flirt, the *laodan* are the matriarchs and the *wudan* are female warriors (Mackerras 43-44, Li Who 200). "In this system, categorization of roles is central [and] different role types have specific requirements for voice, gesture, body movements, makeup and costuming." As one example, "Wu's depiction of Lear deviated from *jingju* conventions in role types" by combining stage techniques of the *laosheng* (old male) with *wusheng* (male warrior) in his projection of Li'er – combining aria singing and steps belonging to the *laosheng*, acrobatics of the *wusheng*, and aspects of the *jing* for this character. "[W]earing the traditional armour backward and with sleeves extended, [gave] the freedom to employ the long-sleeve movements of the old male role" (Li 200), which would not have been feasible with typical constraints of

²¹ "Even for a new play, every [*jingju*] practitioner involved – the scriptwriter, director, actors, and musicians – must take into account the conventions prescribing the way each character sings, recites, acts and dances, as well as other facets of staging. Moreover, the role's performance style may be associated with a school established by a particular master of that role type. Each school has its own repertoire, disciples, and dedicated fans" (Li Who 211).



Fig. 2. Image series from Act II where Wu plays nine characters from *King Lear*, in addition to a dog and himself, while rotating through *jingju* role types, some interpreted through different schools (Wu 0:29:30 - 0:50:15).

costuming for a conventional male warrior (Li Who 196, 200, Mackerras 43-44). This creative melding in role types subverts traditional *jingju* conventions, deepening the character's portrayal through unconventional costuming specific to role types. Dating back to the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), the phenomenon of *nandan* (male *dan*) refers to the historical practice of males performing female roles, a tradition which shifted with the rising gender equality in theatrical roles (Mackerras 44). Wu's interpretation of Lear's daughters (as *nandan*) — Goneril and Regan as *huadan* (vivacious *dan*) and Cordelia as *qingyi* (virtuous, singing woman), interpreted

according to different acting schools — utilizes this performance history as an additional layer to his political commentary on traditional hierarchy and *jingju* theatrical conventions, demonstrating his adeptness in reinterpreting the complexities of role types to serve both narrative and thematic purposes.

Li'er Zaici exemplifies the paradoxical relationship between Shakespearean adaptations and globalization, where the text is a vehicle for disseminating a national literature and the beneficiary of “glocalization,” which “hybridizes the elitist Western canon with local popular culture ... enrich[ing] meanings of Shakespearean plays through hybridization” (Chang 1106). Chang's view on “glocalization” illuminates the dual role Shakespearean texts can play in a globalizing era – by facilitating the transience of a revered literary text, and by providing a canvas for local reinterpretation. Joubin uses polyphony (from musicology) to illuminate the construction of Shakespearean adaptations in East Asia in a literal and metaphorical sense — describing the synthesis within the bricolage (layered voices, accents, body language accentuated by costuming and music) as well as the polarities in audience reception of a particular adaptation (Asia 211). Polyphony, with its emphasis on multiple, independent voices contributing to a cohesive whole, mirrors the layered construction of adaptations like *Li'er Zaici*. Huang's exploration of recurrent strategies in Chinese Shakespearean adaptations further delineates the methods through which these texts navigate the global-local nexus. According to Huang, there are a few recurrent strategies: 1) emphasizing narrative universality, where local sentiment and reality are mirrored in a broader worldview, 2) localization of plot and setting — assimilating Shakespeare into local worldviews, or folding Shakespeare into local performance genres, and 3) creating a pastiche or dramaturgical collage through deconstructive rewritings (514-515).

An emphasis on narrative universality in adapted works a) points to a need to link local

sentiments with a broader, more universal human experience, whereas the localization of plot and setting b) assimilates Shakespearean narratives into local worldviews and performance traditions, fostering a deeper cultural resonance. The creation of a pastiche or dramaturgical collage c) through deconstructive rewritings, invites a re-examination of the source material, enabling new artistic expressions and interpretations. Huang argues, the use of parody (exemplified in Wu's approach) signals Shakespeare's global afterlife has reached a new dimension – stories are familiar to cross-border audiences to such a degree, the literary text has become a means to support explorations of new artistic genres (514-515). *Li'er Zaici's* construction embraces ambiguity, allowing interpretations between the Western adapted text and how *jingju* conventions were distorted or melded with other art forms or *jingju* schools to strengthen character attributes or thematic commentary. While Wu's adaptation embodies Huang's 2nd and 3rd strategies, it is worth noting, the narrative interpretation is easily understood from familiarity with Wu's own personal history (and Taiwan's tensions with China), relative to other Asian adaptations of *King Lear*. Joubin analyzes several works where “directors and adaptors work with echoes between Korean folklores and Shakespearean plays,” deconstructing how these echoes are produced. These works tend to “thrive in intertextual and transhistorical contexts ... where audience[s] may hear echoes from [a] Korean shamanistic myth and *King Lear*, depending on their reading habits and theatre-going history” (Asia 111-112). This illuminates the potential for wide-ranging interpretations among audiences and critics, especially those less familiar with the specific Asian folkloric narratives or the foundational Shakespearean text.

Inhabited by indigenous groups six thousand years ago, Taiwan was later settled by Han Chinese immigrants through Dutch colonization in the 17th century, and became annexed by the

Qing dynasty (1683) until it was ceded to Japan (1895) following the first Sino-Japanese War. After the overthrow of the Qing dynasty (1911), Taiwan eventually came under the control of the Republic of China (1952) after Japan's surrender at the end of WWII.²² An advanced society with high population density, Taiwan has complex relationships with its neighbours, intensified by growing sentiment for declaring independence from China, accentuating its shifting position in East Asian politics. Taiwanese theatre has been shaped by political censorship resulting from these tensions in the last century — most recently by Japanese colonial and anti-communist cultural policies until the late 1980s (Huang 516, Joubin Buddhist 250, Hui-ling Chou 334). Within these cultural and political crossroads, Taiwanese theatre artists of the late 1980s and early 1990s were also being pulled by international market forces with the rise of globalization, adding pressure to innovate Chinese traditional opera, while adapting western plays to attract wider audiences. The Contemporary Legend Theatre, founded by Wu and his wife Lin in 1986, shortly thereafter staged a *jingju* adaptation of *Macbeth* set in medieval China (*The Kingdom of Desire*), which made thirteen high profile worldwide tours, and became known for its dramatic combination of psychological complexity fused with *jingju* and western theatre²³ (Chang 1107, Li Who 196). *Kingdom of Desire* was heavily supported by the Republic of China in Taiwan and the Taiwanese government as a nationalizing project, rebuilding Taiwanese national pride after a series of diplomatic setbacks in the 1970s became generationally entrenched²⁴ (Chang 1107). However, on the heels of *The Kingdom of Desire*'s success, there was a turn in political and

²² Following the Chinese Civil War (ending in 1949), the Republic of China (ROC) government retreated to Taiwan as the People's Republic of China (PRC) became established on the mainland. The PRC considered Taiwan a breakaway province, while the ROC saw itself as the legitimate government of all China. This resulted in the Taiwan Strait crises, where tensions flared up multiple times from the 1950s to the 1990s, each crisis risking significant military escalation. The US-Taiwan Relations Act of 1979 enacted US support of Taiwan's defensive capabilities without formal diplomatic recognition.

²³ Following *The Kingdom of Desire*'s success, the Contemporary Legend Theatre produced three more Shakespearean adaptations in the *jingju* genre: *The Vengeance of the Prince (Hamlet)* (1990), *Li'er Zaici* (2001), and *The Tempest* (2004), where only *Li'er Zaici* received comparable acclaim to *The Kingdom of Desire* (Chang 1107).

²⁴ Taiwan's geopolitical constraints are deeply rooted in historical events, shaped by intricate dynamics of international diplomacy, security concerns and economic interdependence. The diplomatic shifts of the 1970s, particularly the US-PRC rapprochement and the ROC's expulsion from the UN were critical junctures which continue to influence Taiwan's position on the global stage.

cultural tides in 1990s Taiwan. In a 2004 interview, Wu comments on the professional headwinds he faced in the prior decade, saying, “I find the nativist call for ‘localization’ absurd and ironic. What does it mean to ‘*bentu hua* (localize, nativize)’ in art and literature? ... We worked so hard to maintain and reinvent the exquisite tradition of *jingju*; why should we be excluded from the artistic forum?” (Joubin Interview). Wu’s commentary on these shifts illustrates his frustrations and the ironies within Taiwan’s cultural policies of the time. Despite having been born, raised, trained and having started a theatre company in Taiwan, staging plays for Taiwanese audiences amid a stringent nationalistic cultural policy permeating everything from festivals to funding in the arts, Wu found himself increasingly marginalized in his own country. Due to *jingju*’s origins in Beijing two hundred years prior, its status in Taiwan as *guoju* (national theatre) began to be questioned (Joubin Interview, Li Who 201). Joubin argues, *jingju* is often “caught in a whirlwind of conflicting ideologies, as Taiwanese nativist campaigns and rising tensions between China and Taiwan have turned *jingju* into a scapegoat” (Buddhist 250). As an outcome of these policy shifts, Chinese artistic elements were under pressure to be eliminated or otherwise be penalized, which led to cuts in funding to artists and organizations seen as too close to China.²⁵ This also came on the heels of a public falling out between Wu and his mentor, Master Zhou, resulting in Wu being shut out from Beijing operatic circles. This near simultaneous dual cultural rejection and the financial struggles his company faced as a result led him to Europe, where he experimented with *King Lear* as a means of introducing *jingju* to Western theatre practitioners.²⁶

²⁵ Huang encapsulates the picture of a Taiwanese, state-endorsed, government sponsored environment a decade later describing an individual festival: “The month-long ‘Shakespeare in Taipei’ festival (May 2003) ... provid[ed] a platform for artistically innovative and commercially viable experimental works. As a multilingual society (Mandarin, Taiwanese, Hakka and aboriginal languages), Taiwan has produced a significant number of mainstream performances, either entirely in a dialect or with a mixture of Mandarin and a local dialect or English. Some of these works reflect Taiwan’s history, while others question that history and the much-contested ‘Chineseness’ of the island’s identity” (516).

²⁶ The idea for Wu’s adaptation of *King Lear* began in a workshop hosted by Ariane Mnouchkine in Paris (Théâtre du Soleil), “designed to address limitations in acting methods of both the European avant-garde and *jingju* practices ... On an allegorical level, Wu used the idea of Lear’s two bodies, as both a monarch and a father and as a character and an actor to address his own divided identities” as a Taiwanese practitioner of *jingju*, and an island nation under pervasive threat of invasion from China (Joubin Asia 66-67).

Shortly after his return to Taiwan, Master Zhou died, and channeled through Wu's remorse, *Li'er Zaici* was further developed and refined into a full stage play (Joubin Interview, Joubin Buddhist 250-51). Wu's remorse is a consistent thread throughout the play, mostly as an internal conflict, but notably as a dog in Act II.

A Dog: Woof woof woof. Hum! Laugh not at the dog.
I am a dog who has inherited his master's power!
An empowered dog can give commands!

Ha ha, ha ha, ha ha.
Do not hate the dog.
Think not that I am base, for when you grow old, you had better keep a good dog.
The more impoverished and lonely you are,
the more priceless the base creature will become.

Woof, woof, woof!
How I wish I could talk (Joubin Buddhist 254-255).

The caricature of the dog and its master, an allegory of Wu's relationship with Master Zhou, offers a clear critique on the traditional tutor-pupil/master-disciple system of *jingju*, connoting the psychological impact of their fallout and the hierarchical dynamics which once defined their relationship. As a comedy structured around the role of the Fool (a Chinese clown adorned with a white patch on their nose), Act II shows Wu "enact[ing a] metaphor of a dog scavenging for food and then tracking down the hiding place of Li'er," within a series of scenes where he plays several characters from *King Lear*. "Wu adopted a clown's voice and everyday language to speak the Fool's lines, mocking Li'er for his folly in giving away his kingdom" (Li Who 205-206). This scene illustrates the distance between Wu and Master Zhou, the mutual contempt which had developed in the space between them, and the pressure on Wu to remain silent (prior to writing this play). Wu's choice to voice this critique through a comedic lens, in the role of the dog, illuminates nuances in the multifaceted nature of mentorship, power asymmetries

and artistic inheritance. His allegory conveys a defiant tone towards traditional cultural hierarchy and arguably by extension, the Beijing operatic establishment and audiences who had refrained from formally recognizing Wu's abilities and training.

This chapter attempts to situate *Li'er Zaici* within the broader context of intercultural adaptations, deconstructing Wu's adept interweaving of Shakespeare's narrative with *jingju* theatrical conventions and his own personal history – exemplifying a form of artistic resistance which transcends cultural and linguistic barriers. *Li'er Zaici* illuminates how body language can serve as a tool for semiotic resistance, while enabling a rich intercultural dialogue, redefining the Shakespearean text and a traditional form of expression. The play's development amid Wu's personal-professional crises and his estrangement from Master Zhou creates autobiographical depth, which further enriched the *King Lear* text. In embedding *jingju* role types within the characters of *King Lear*, aspects of Chinese cultural history and the genre were brought to the forefront, while Wu's subversive approach enabled political commentary (on tradition, hierarchy, culture and artistic genre), at a time when tradition was increasingly falling out of favour in the interest of globalization and innovation. Situated at the confluence of historical, cultural, and geopolitical tensions, this play encapsulates a microcosm of Taiwan's ongoing struggle to define itself amidst the pressures of globalization and emerging from the shadows of its colonial pasts.

5 – Comparative analysis of strategies & tactics

In previous chapters, I unravelled how each play utilized language and cultural elements to resist dominant ideologies, and how each artist adapted and fused diverse cultural influences to forge new artistic expressions, which contributed to evolving and re-evaluating artistic conventions in the face of contemporary headwinds. *Agra Bazar* and *Li'er Zaici* both emerged from distinct yet similar desires to question and redefine the boundaries of traditional theatre and artistic expression in response to layers of contextual friction. Rising nationalism became an issue both creators contended with in their external environments, which induced different impediments in their respective theatrical environments. For Tanvir, the nationalistic rise in institutional prominence of Hindi led to Urdu becoming suppressed, misused and misunderstood, amid the widespread economic decline due to many factors (including a violent societal rupture) (Orsini 66-72, Malick Translator 32-33, Zaidi 158-159). While South Asian theatrical circles were influenced by these larger geopolitical impacts, institutional support had waned for using theatre as an emergent tool for creating social and political change – Tanvir's area of interest (Malick Refashioning 132-134). Additionally, the limitations of the urban imagination, where Western theatre remained a key colonial influence prior to India's Independence, was also an ever-present constraint Tanvir needed to contend with, despite a growing movement to return to South Asia's roots and rejuvenate its cultural heritage (Dalmia 256). Conversely, for Wu, rising nationalism was happening in Taiwan and China at different paces, and the rising prominence of *jingju* as China's national theatre led Taiwan to enact its own nativist cultural policies (amongst others) to resist China's rising economic and political might – limiting funding, financing and staging of *jingju* productions in favour of works viewed as more aligned with Taiwanese nationalistic interests (Huang 516, Joubin Buddhist 250, Joubin Interview, Hui-ling Chou 334, Li

Who 201). For Wu, just being a Taiwanese artist, practicing a Chinese art form (also becoming emblematic of Chinese nationalism), in this political climate became an impediment to his theatre company's progression. The external and internal constraints impacting both theatre artists illuminate a small sliver of the impediments derived from these larger geopolitical shifts, societal ruptures and rising nationalistic pursuits.

Orsini discusses the relationship between genre and space, the mixing of "cultural imaginaries," their articulations in different languages and genres based on their geography "in relation to other literary tastes, stories and trajectories. In such a multicultural and multilingual environment, the question of whether authors chose to mix imaginaries (or not, and why) requires particular attention" (Orsini Multilingual 354). Understanding cultural materialist aspects of *Agra Bazar* and *Li'er Zaici* entails framing the spatial contexts inherent in these stories, and how both creators used parallels, mirrors, juxtapositions and ambiguity to frame the issues and questions posed by their plays (Orsini Multilingual 351). Both artists employed linguistic/semiotic resistance against external forces (ie. linguistic and political hierarchizations in *Agra Bazar*) and internal constraints (ie. *jingju* theatrical conventions in *Li'er Zaici*). Both artists addressed these dual constraints in similar ways with a range of emerging strategies. To address the shifting geopolitical sands embedded in the region's linguistic hierarchy at the time, Tanvir relied on a range of Urdu poetic forms to convey his depiction of the post-Mughal market atmosphere in *Agra Bazar*. South Asia's social stratifications were already interwoven into the history of Urdu poetic forms and Akbarabadi's poetry, written to capture the popular imagination in his time. In addition, Tanvir's use of Hindi, Urdu and Chhattisgarhi (their local dialects, folk songs and colloquialisms), added further granularity to his depiction of socio-economic and linguistic hierarchization in South Asia. To draw parallels between the

economic and political atmospheres of the Mughal decline and the British colonial decline, Tanvir juxtaposed material conditions with hegemonic impositions in the marketplace, illuminating their lingering impacts amid the audience backdrop of colonial decline, ascending nationalism and linguistic divisions. The depiction of Urdu poetic forms during the golden age of Urdu poetry denotes the influence historical court patronage had on its place in the linguistic hierarchization within *Agra Bazar*'s marketplace (Anand & Dalrymple Mutiny 0:11:30-0:22:00). This juxtaposed the post-Independence era, as *Agra Bazar*'s multilingual construction became a means of questioning India's new linguistic policies favouring Hindi (and arguably the continued role of English), with a plea for acknowledgement of South Asia's ingrained pluralist fabric. In doing so, *Agra Bazar* was revealed to be a microcosm of South Asia's ongoing struggle to reclaim its cultural narrative.

Conversely, *Li'er Zaici* relied on a global narrative (*King Lear*), anchored in local traditions (*jingju*), to highlight universal themes (power, betrayal and madness). *Li'er Zaici*'s fusion disrupted the narrative continuity, creating a dialogic engagement with the play's layered critique of the artistic form, Wu's own professional crisis and Taiwan's struggle with China. Wu leveraged lyrical and performative aspects of *jingju* (infusing Shakespearean elements, body language and contemporary dialogue), blurring boundaries in *jingju* role types, to question its rigidity and related conformity pressures to traditional identity tropes – one's own, one's family, the nation's and within the contemporary arts. By contrast, where *Agra Bazar* predominantly employs mirrors and parallels, *Li'er Zaici* embeds juxtapositions within its mirrors to deepen the inherent internal conflicts. A one-man show depicting several characters from *King Lear* serves as a vehicle for Wu's commentary on identity, loyalty and the inner conflicts arising from having multiple personas. Linguistic and/or semiotic divergence in the narrative construction of both

plays thus was a means of renegotiating and redefining identity, historical understanding (to make sense of recent events), and reinventing artistic expression. In *Li'er Zaici*, body language (gestures, movements, facial expressions, mime/pantomime, dance, acrobatics and martial arts) provides a range of tools for storytelling and emotional expression, expanding the narrative beyond the usual confines of spoken dialogue. As a physical articulation, Wu's embodiment of multiple characters from *King Lear* questions *jingju*'s traditional framework by blurring lines between role types and introducing new depth to the portrayal of Shakespeare's characters. Wu intricately interweaves familial dynamics from *King Lear* with his fraught mentorship with Master Zhou, and (more loosely) with Taiwan's struggle for autonomy amid growing friction with China – creating a poignant metaphor for Taiwan's own identity and familial conflicts.

In both plays, linguistic resistance manifested through adaptations and fusion of various cultural and linguistic or semiotic elements; however, the role of adaptation in both plays, arguably, was to use an historical text (Akbarabadi's poetry, Shakespeare's *King Lear*) as the foundational canvas to provide the basis for questioning and resisting ingrained tradition and social hierarchizations. *King Lear* and Akbarabadi's poetry held historical parallels to the present within the foundational texts, and both artists further anchored their theatrical works in *nacha* and *jingju* theatrical conventions as a means to localize and shape the plays' commentary on local issues. The outcome in *Li'er Zaici* was an adaptation which simultaneously localized a Western narrative and revitalized a Chinese theatrical form with new psychological depth. Chang says of creators working in Shakespearean adaptations in East Asia, "once they do away with 'the author's intention' and 'the ultimate meaning' of the 'works' as emphasized in traditional approaches, how to rediscover 'work,' 'text,' and 'author' in reading and interpretation opens up more possibilities" (Chang 1106). For Wu, those possibilities included deepening the theatrical

viewing experience and its political commentary, enriching a centuries old text, imbuing the portrayal of its characters in local artistic familiarity, etc. “[*Jingju* is more lyrical than narrative, its story and structure are usually loose, and it is often imbued with out-of-date values ... To complement, the dramatic tension, psychological complexity and vivid multi-faceted characterization of Shakespearean plays provide an effective vehicle for innovating *jingju*” (Chang 1107). As an outcome of questions raised by *Li'er Zaici*, Wu's adaptation over time eventually prompted a re-evaluation of *jingju*'s role and relevance in contemporary Taiwan, while enriching the cultural heritage genre with new perspectives and possibilities. Orsini discusses the circulation of global literary works, describing how “‘peripheral’ and ‘newer’ literatures both draw upon the older more established literatures, seek recognition from their ‘centres’ and rebel against them as a strategy of self-assertion” (Orsini Multilingual 348). For Wu's and Tanvir's plays, it is difficult to ignore how the strategic use of adaptation, combined with anchoring them in local genres, became a successful approach in broadening their appeal and strengthening audience resonance, as both works resulted in a cross-cultural dialogue that transcended geographical and temporal boundaries. However, Tanvir arguably exceeded what Orsini describes. *Agra Bazar* illuminated the history of Akbarabadi's work (rejected by the literary establishment in his time, intergenerationally kept alive by popular demand), bringing his work to a surface awareness in recent popular imagination, at a point in time where Urdu language and poetic forms were politically falling out of favour. This play also elevated indigenous theatrical traditions, while preserving and positioning *nacha* as a valuable part of South Asia's artistic legacies, in an atmosphere where indigenous theatrical forms had long been suppressed.

Despite emerging from disparate geographical and cultural contexts – India and Taiwan – these plays present nuanced dialogues which extend, complicate and debate the essence of traditional theatre, linguistic norms and cultural narratives, amid layers of contextual friction and geopolitical shifts. Surrounding the development of *Agra Bazar* was a region freshly grappling with its colonial fallout, whereas with *Li'er Zaici*, views on *jingju* theatrical conventions were impacted by the broader socio-political tensions between China and Taiwan (and *jingju*'s rise as China's national theatre). Tanvir's strategic use of multilingualism and folk traditions subvert the imposed linguistic dominance while elevating the region's inherent pluralism. Through the lens of *jingju*, Wu navigates a tightrope between tradition's rigidity and an aspiration for loosening socio-political constraints imposed on identity, family, nation and the arts. These plays, while corroborating each other in their questioning of ingrained social stratification, further expanded the dialogue of how new adaptations serve as a foundational canvas for political resistance. Both plays, however, complicate and at times diverge in their approaches, revealing a spectrum of strategies in artistic resistance at play – from the linguistic to the performative – highlighting their contributions to discussions of national identity, cultural preservation and artistic innovation.

6 – Within the folds and creases

Book-seller: What is surprising is that Mian Nazir belongs to a respectable family. It's a shame his poems are being sung in streets and marketplaces by illiterate and uncultured people. He should show some regard at least for his family's reputation, if not his own (Tanvir Agra Bazar 69-71).

Wu Hsing-Kuo the actor-character:
 I cannot see myself. I see through myself. I want myself.
 I should not be myself. I hate myself. I am still myself.
 Would I be me? I have to face myself. I want to find myself.
 Oh heaven, why have you sent a trap for me?
 Old Lear may be valiant but he is trapped in deep mud.
 (Joubin Buddhist 261)

The Oxford dictionary definition of origami is “the Japanese art of folding paper into decorative shapes and figures.” Revealed in this research project was how both creators’ approaches were akin to exercises in cultural origami, where each crease and bend represents a deliberate and considered fold of traditional, contemporary or artistic elements in the construction of their plays. Just as origami transforms a flat, two-dimensional sheet of paper into a structured, intricate, three-dimensional form, both theatrical artists reshaped culturally-specific foundational texts into richly layered intercultural theatre performances offering multiple perspectives. The two passages above from *Agra Bazar* and *Li'er Zaici* illustrate how identities and cultural values were folded and shaped through textual and performative complexities. Wu's monologue captures his internal conflict and search for identity. Each line reflects creases in his self-perception, where he struggles between visibility and invisibility, hate and acceptance, feeling trapped and self-liberation. Just as origami selectively exposes parts of the paper, concealing others for a desired shape, the bookseller's disdain folds the privileging of certain classes and literacies over others in *Agra Bazar's* market, thereby folding perceptions of respectability into a critique of urban India's societal norms. In this metaphor, cultural origami

involves the precise folding of cultures, languages, narratives, artistic genres and theatrical practices into multifaceted theatrical experiences. In both plays, there was precision in intentionality, complexity in simplicity, and a transformation amounting to reinvention. This analysis also unfolded the creases in the deliberate use of linguistics and/or semiotics in *Agra Bazar* and *Li'er Zaici*, revealing how they became mechanisms for resisting and reshaping traditional hierarchies and expectations.

This research journey began with layered objectives of 1) exploring how Tanvir and Wu devised subversive strategies in their theatrical works to address the geopolitical shifts happening around them (particularly rising nationalism), and 2) deconstructing the local artistic genres in which each creator anchored their play, to illuminate their respective approaches. The methodological and theoretical framework folded into this analysis of *Agra Bazar* and *Li'er Zaici* used three theoretical concepts: linguistic (and/or semiotic) resistance, intercultural adaptation and cultural materialism. These theoretical lenses enabled a robust framework for analyzing how *Agra Bazar* and *Li'er Zaici* negotiate complexities of identity, power, and resistance. As a result, both plays appear to exemplify the potential of intercultural theatre and the arts to question socio-political norms and artistic conventions, offering insights into the complex use of adaptations and local genre conventions. Central to this exploration were three key questions: a) how did the multilingual structure in Tanvir's play subvert South Asia's embedded social stratification? b) how did Wu achieve his creative defiance of traditional Chinese *jingju* theatrical conventions in his adaptation of *King Lear*? c) what insights does a comparison of the two texts and of their creators' strategies yield about intercultural adaptation and artistic resistance? Through a deconstruction of both plays, the key findings illuminate how Tanvir's *Agra Bazar* and Wu's *Li'er Zaici* adeptly interwove traditional and modern theatrical

forms to comment on, to raise questions about and to resist shifting cultural and geopolitical hegemonies of their respective times and contexts. This research unfolded and examined the placement of creases within these plays, revealing the intricate patterns made in efforts to address shifting external realities.

Key findings —

Agra Bazar and *Li'er Zaici* emerge as two artistic responses to the flux in geopolitical and cultural norms within India and Taiwan respectively, in the times of their creation – reminding of the theatrical form's ability to fold time, memory and space into the fabric of the present. Each play reflects its creator's need to innovatively grapple with the changes they were immersed in. Both artists used a foundational text (Akbarabadi's poetry or Shakespeare's *King Lear*) as an underlying canvas in their plays to question and resist contextually ingrained hierarchizations. Embedded in these historical texts were parallels to the audience's current reality, illuminating cyclical repetitions in history and universal themes. Both artists grounded their works in local artistic genres (*nacha*, *jingju*) as a localization strategy to counterbalance the more global/regional weight of the foundational texts used. A key insight derived from analyzing the construction of both works was the role historical royal patronage played in artforms used in both plays. The Mughal court played a significant role in shaping Urdu poetic forms through its patronage, as was the case with the *jingju* genre and the role the Qing dynasty played in evolving its form. Looking at the cultural materialist aspects of the plays drew various parallels – between the economic atmosphere of the post-Mughal era, highlighting the golden age of Urdu poetry, and post-Independence urban India in *Agra Bazar*; and between familial tensions in *King Lear*, Wu's fraught relationship with his mentor, and Taiwan's relationship with China in *Li'er Zaici*.

In addition to parallels and mirrors, both artists used juxtaposition and ambiguity as narrative devices to continuously provoke questions, and in *Li'er Zaici*, to deepen the internal conflicts inherent in the work. In terms of linguistic comprehension in audience reception, urban South Asian audiences were unfamiliar with the Chattisgarhi language and *nacha* performance conventions, leaving aspects of the theatrical experience open to interpretation or misunderstanding. Similarly, *Li'er Zaici*'s construction allowed room for interpretation between the Western adapted text and how *jingju* theatrical conventions became distorted or melded with other art forms, contemporary language or *jingju* schools, to strengthen character attributes or thematic commentary – making what was concealed in the folds as meaningful or as important as what was visible.

Looking more closely at both artists' strategies of resistance, *Agra Bazar* questioned the linguistic hierarchization of colonial and post-colonial South Asian language policies, by advocating for (while honouring) a pluralistic view of the region's cultural fabric – becoming a microcosm of South Asia's struggle to own its cultural narrative. Conversely, *Li'er Zaici* relied on body language (gestures, movements, facial expressions, mime/pantomime, dance, acrobatics and martial arts) embedded in the *jingju* genre as a means of semiotic resistance, while anchoring the work in a Shakespearean text. This fusion enabled a broader appeal of *jingju* while critiquing its rigid conventions impacting identity – personal, familial, community, Taiwan's national identity – and contemporary artistic expression. These intricate approaches to linguistic and/or semiotic resistance created folds scene-by-scene, changing its contours, revealing how the beauty of theatre lies in its ability to blend, bend and transcend boundaries.

Personal and professional sentiments of the creators were conveyed as inherently political (and geopolitical) in both works. Tanvir's commitment to social issues – deploying folk theatre

influences from the contextual surroundings of his upbringing – shaped his communal approach to theatrical creation and to *Agra Bazar*, enabling him to arrive at a theatrical construction which raised questions about the imposed hierarchies (in language, culture, within the regional arts, etc). Wu's turbulent relationship with Master Zhou and the geopolitical tensions between Taiwan and China (implied as a familial conflict) are threaded throughout *Li'er Zaici*, framing them as similar struggles to those conveyed by Shakespeare's *King Lear* tragedy. Linguistic and/or semiotic uses in the narrative construction of both plays became a means of resisting, renegotiating and redefining identity and historical understanding – to make sense of recent events and one's place within it. These creators carefully folded multiple elements of their regional cultural heritage with contemporary influences to raise questions and invite layered interpretations – reminding us of how art is often a delicate balance of tradition and innovation, where the placement of every fold and crease adds depth and perspective to an unfolding human narrative.

Areas for further study —

Several areas of subsequent study have emerged from these key findings, which could deepen understanding in practical and policy-related areas of artistic production and cultural exchange, and provide insights for theatre practitioners, researchers, educators and policymakers interested in the intersections of culture, art, and society. There are opportunities to:

1. examine a larger cross-section of subversive and innovative practices which fold several cultural and artistic layers to resist hierarchies and boundaries.

2. apply postcolonial and decolonial theoretical frameworks for assessing how the intercultural arts are used as a platform for unfolding colonial legacies, and refolding them as narratives of empowerment and reformulated identity.
3. analyze how globalization influences the folding of global and local elements into artistic identity and perceived authenticity in intercultural theatre and the arts.
4. examine how forms of court (and other) patronage, contemporary funding structures, political pressures and nationalizing cultural policies have been folded into the artistic fabric of intercultural theatre, and as a result, which cultural layers were folded inward, hidden from view.
5. delve more deeply into narrative echoes produced by the folds and creases in intercultural theatre, how creators continue to approach these creative constructions (including the use of literary texts as a foundational canvas).

One of the broader implications of this research lies in understanding how intercultural theatre artists explore identity construction situated across shifting individual, family, community, national and regional constructs. One of the conclusions this study asserts is how the melding of traditional and contemporary art forms in these plays demonstrates a movement towards inclusive and dialogic forms of cultural production that has been underway as an outcome of globalization. Reflecting on this research project, the process was not merely an academic exercise, but further fortified an appreciation for the resilience and experimentation of these artistic approaches. I anticipate this research will inform my own professional work as an interdisciplinary artist, influencing where the folds and creases are placed in my own subsequent artistic works. Furthermore, given the mirrors, parallels, juxtapositions and ambiguities used, and narrative echoes produced, I look forward to understanding how these aspects of intercultural

theatre become amplified when similar theatrical works become anchored in digital or virtual space in future.

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Appendix

List of Passages — Agra Bazar

[1]

Poet: You are attacking a centuries old tradition of great Persian and Indian masters. In which other culture can you find a thing as beautiful as a *ghazal*?

Companion: I am not disputing its beauty, only commenting on its limited scope.

Poet: What you cannot write about in a *ghazal*, you can always say in a *quasida*.

Companion: Besides encomiums for kings and rulers, what else can you write in a *quasida*?

Poet: But the *mathnavi* allows you the freedom to write about anything you please (Tanvir Agra Bazar 55).

[2]

Fakirs:

My words no longer have their usual grip,
My speech has begin to falter and trip;
I am always in a sad thoughtfulness caught,
And my poetry has virtually come to a halt.

....

All around— only suffering, deprivation
Who should one weep over, who should one mention?
The times are barren of any sustaining breeze
And the tree of life withers, without a single leaf.

Jewellers, traders and other wealthy gents,
Who thrived by lending, are now mendicants;
The shops are deserted, dust on counter and scale,
Desolate shopkeepers wait like captives in jail.

Poverty has destroyed what was once a lovely city,
Every street, woebegone, every mansion arouses pity;
A garden needs a gardener in order to grow and thrive,
But Agra waits in vain for a tender caring eye (Tanvir Agra Bazar 38-39).

Shahr āshob excerpts written by Nazir Akbarabadi.

[3]

Companion:

And the times Mir-sahib has seen in his life! In this town he saw the unfaithfulness of his own dear ones.

Left home, left his native town. Even left Delhi which was once the ultimate destination of every sensitive and accomplished person. Wandered from place to place, witnessed the attacks by the Persians and the Turks. Witnessed the oppression of the Afghans, the Ruhelas, the Rajputs, the Jats, the Marathas. Saw a river of blood flow through Delhi with human heads floating like bowls ... He went through all of this. And now he lives in Lucknow and is witness to the havoc caused by the English.

...

Book-seller:

You are right, these are turbulent times. When I look at it, what I see is not the Mughal Empire but a big, powerful lion being attacked by hundreds of cats and dogs. See it wounded and helpless, vultures and other birds of prey have also gathered to tear it to pieces. And the lion has neither the leisure to moan nor the luxury to die (Tanvir Agra Bazar 52-53)

[4]

Hawkers, children, youth and passersby gather around him. The noise stops and, for the first time, the madari's words can be heard clearly.

Madari:

(To the monkey) Come, show them your dance. Let us dance for the people of Agra. Children give him a hand— can you clap with one hand?

...

Gentlemen, I ask the Hindus in the name of Ram and Muslims in the name of Quran, please move back a little. *(To the monkey)*. All right now, show us how Nadir Shah attacked Delhi. *(Monkey attacks Madari with a stick)* Oh! Oh! You'll destroy the entire city of Delhi! Stop it, stop it, man! All right, how did Ahmed Shah Abdali invade Delhi? *(Monkey strikes again)*. Oh! Oh! Enough now, you will flatten the entire country. Now tell us, how did Surajmal Jat attack Agra? *(Monkey repeats the act)* Oh! Oh! You'll kill me! Stop it, stop it, man! All right, tell us how did the British enter India? *(Monkey mimes begging)* And what did the Laot Sahib do in the battle of Plassey? *(Monkey holds the stick like a gun and mimes firing)* Oh! He opened fire! And what happened in Bengal? *(Monkey slaps his stomach and mimes weakness)* There was a famine! *(Monkey lies down)* People died of hunger! And what is our condition today? *(Monkey slaps the stomach again)* And what will happen tomorrow? *(Monkey falls down)* So what should we do? *(Monkey approaches those watching the show and prostrates itself at their feet)* Salute them! *(Monkey salutes; people start to slip away)*. (Tanvir Agra Bazar 41-42).

A madari (street entertainer) and his monkey perform a short skit in the market, covering 200+ years of South Asian history— spanning Iranian, Afghan, Mughal and Jat conquests, British colonial rule and a famine induced by conditions imposed by the British East India Company.

[5]

Book-seller:

Call it progress or call it decline. The fact, however, is that times are changing very fast. Machines have

arrived and there are printing presses everywhere. There are translations of the Holy Book, as well as of the Bible. I have heard of an Englishman in Calcutta who is an expert in Sanskrit, Persian, Urdu and several other Indian languages. He has started a school called Fort William College. Various Indian languages are taught there and now I understand that they will also hold mushairas.

...

This is the age of atheism. We need a crusader to alter the course of the time.

...

Companion:

What the age really needs, Maulana, is not crusaders but human beings. But, unfortunately, there is no sign of them (Tanvir Agra Bazar 57).

[6]

Hamid:

‘Messenger, go tell her without mentioning me,
The one who loves you is dying, so sick is he.
The moment, in anger, she went away from me,
Why didn’t lightning strike and I cease to be?
It must be she who goes out dressed up at this hour,
From her radiant face alone can issue the light I see.
No one shed tears as I wandered the wilderness,
Except the blisters on my feet which wept openly.
When others fell, she rushed to help them up again,
But when I fell there was neither help nor sympathy.
Ah Nazir, we advised you but you listened not,
You peruse the book of love too keenly’ (Tanvir Agra Bazar 83).

A *ghazal* written by Nazir Akbarabadi recited by Hamid in the market at someone’s request.

[7]

‘Again, there is a market for rats these days,
I too have prepared them in various ways,
I chop and I pound and I mash three or four
And I make such a mix you’ll ask for more!
My rat pickle is the pride of any store!
The rats I choose are large and fat,
Each frog I add is the size of a cat,
Deliciously crisp and spicy and hot,
Judge for yourself how well they have rot!
Its price is rising, is sure to rise more,
My rat pickle is the pride of any store!’ (Tanvir Agra Bazar 70)

The grocer reads out a new poem Nazir Akbarabadi wrote to help him promote his shop, comedically using a pickled rat as a stand-in for meats the grocer prepares, comedically exaggerating a rampant infestation.

[8]

Companion:

[H]ow would you rank Nazir as a poet?

Tazkiranawis:

(browsing through a book) A very lively man—good-natured, soft-spoken, greets everyone with a smile, does not hurt anybody. In other words, a man probably without a parallel anywhere in the world. But poetry? That's an entirely different kettle of fish. I could never accept vulgarity, cheap nonsensical rhymes and a shoddy common kind of humour as poetry. To regard Nazir as a poet will be a gross injustice, both to him and to poetry. There is no room for him in the list of poets.

...

Book-seller:

What is surprising is that Mian Nazir belongs to a respectable family. It's a shame his poems are being sung in streets and marketplaces by illiterate and uncultured people. He should show some regard at least for his family's reputation, if not his own (Tanvir Agra Bazar 69-71).

List of Passages — Li'er Zaici

[1]

Act I Scene 2:

King Li Er: My Shoes. My child?

No, no, no. I have no child.

On this lovely, sunny day in March,

Blossoming flowers fill the field.

Let daddy pluck some flowers for his youngest daughter.

Don't let the flowers fade, and don't let the spring end.

Yet, flowers do fade, and spring is not returning.

Liya, my daughter ...

Do you not know me?

Alright, let me tell you who I am.

My name is Li Er.

I am Li'er ... shush ...

Where is my child?

Oh, my child, even though you are my child.

There is no place for you in this world.

I have to do something about it. I have to!
Whoa! Hold on there, I have unfinished business.

The thunder from heaven shocked me wide awake.
Impious daughters enrage heaven and earth!

I draw the bow and send the arrow flying...
The arrow hits the bull eye of my soul!
(Joubin Buddhist 251-252)

[2]

Act II Scene I

A Dog: Woof woof woof. Hum! Laugh not at the dog.
I am a dog who has inherited his master's power!
An empowered dog can give commands!

Ha ha, ha ha, ha ha.
Do not hate the dog.
Think not that I am base, for when you grow old, you had better keep a good dog.
The more impoverished and lonely you are,
the more priceless the base creature will become.

Woof, woof, woof!
How I wish I could talk.

Enough fooling around. Let's get down to business.

I am here to look for my master.
Lear! Lear! Your highness, where are you?
Oh, there's a dog's den. Lear!
Your highness, why are you sleeping in a dog's den?
Come out now please.

Our Lear thought he is always right. He alone holds the truth.
And now, that truth is in a dog kennel!

Words on the street have it that such self-righteous dogs fear nothing more than the bitch.
Let me piss at his den and smoke him out!

Hey, out he comes!
Let me piss here.

Truth, Truth! Come on out!
Truth, Truth! Come on out!

King Li Er: I was sound asleep. Which undisciplined dog woke me up?
(Joubin Buddhist 254-255)

[3]

Act III

Wu Hsing-Kuo the actor-character:

I cannot see myself. I see through myself. I want myself.

I should not be myself. I hate myself. I am still myself.

Would I be me? I have to face myself. I want to find myself.

Oh heaven, why have you sent a trap for me?

Old Lear may be valiant but he is trapped in deep mud.

(Joubin Buddhist 261)

Table 1 – Comparative analysis: strategies & tactics

| Nodal points ²⁷ + theoretical or strategic framework elements | <i>Agra Bazar</i> | <i>Li'er Zaici</i> |
|--|---|---|
| Contextual (external/ geopolitical forces) | 1. Colonial and rising post-colonial social stratifications were already embedded in linguistic hierarchization and theatrical conventions. | 1. Rising tensions between China and Taiwan were further exacerbated by Taiwan's desire for independence. |
| | 2. Rising nationalism of two countries (at differing paces) was something both artists needed to contend with in the creation of their works and as headwinds in their careers. | |
| | 3. A corresponding rise in institutional prominence of Hindi led to Urdu being suppressed, misused and misunderstood in post-Independence India. 4. An economic decline post-Independence was due to many factors, including the violent social rupture of Partition. | 3. This resulted in Taiwan enacting its own nativist policies to resist succumbing to pressures due to China's economic and political rise. 4. Rising prominence of <i>jingju</i> as China's national theatre at a time when it was also referred to as <i>guoju</i> (Taiwan's national theatre), became an issue which muddied Taiwan's desire for independence. |
| Theatrical environment (internal constraints) | 1. Tanvir's early career involvement in the PWA and IPTA – organizations which played a role in shaping modern theatre (as an ideological tool) for social and political change – influenced his theatrical approach. 2. He contended with limitations of the urban imagination, at a time when Western theatre heavily influenced theatre in urban centres in South Asia, prior to Independence. 3. At certain points in the 1940s and 60s, there was a widely felt need to return to South Asia's roots, to rejuvenate India's cultural heritage. | 1. Taiwanese nativist cultural policies marginalized <i>jingju</i> (in funding, financing and staging) in favour of productions viewed as more aligned to Taiwanese nationalistic interests. 2. Just being a Taiwanese artist practicing a Chinese cultural form in this political environment became a significant impediment to Wu's career. 3. Wu received little recognition as an accomplished <i>jingju</i> performer in Beijing operatic circles due to his fallout with Master Zhou (a prominent <i>jingju</i> master). |

²⁷ “Whenever there is a power relation, there is a possibility of resistance ... and consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power. If power must be understood as an asymmetrical set of relations in which there exists a multiplicity of nodal points or relations, this multiplicity necessarily also entails the possibility of resistance at each node” (Martin Rojo 78).

| Nodal points + theoretical or strategic framework elements | <i>Agra Bazar</i> | <i>Li'er Zaici</i> |
|---|---|---|
| <p>Linguistic/semiotic resistance — using language/body language to resist colonial and cultural hegemonies</p> <p>– <i>What is the subversive role of language in both plays?</i> – <i>How is it used as a tool for political resistance?</i></p> | <p>1. Both artists used linguistics or semiotics as a form of resistance against external forces (ie. linguistic and political hierarchies in <i>Agra Bazar</i>) and internal constraints (ie. <i>jingju</i> conventions in <i>Li'er Zaici</i>).</p> <p>2. Linguistic/semiotic use in the narrative construction of both plays became a means of resisting, renegotiating and redefining identity, historical understanding (to make sense of recent events), and reinventing artistic expression.</p> <p>Tanvir's use of:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Urdu poetic forms and Akbarabadi's poetry/persona aided in his depiction of the linguistic hierarchy in Agra's post-Mughal marketplace. Hindi, Urdu, Chhattisgarhi added granularity to his socio-economic depiction of the era. a layered construction with these elements raised questions about India's post-Independence socio-linguistic hierarchization and new language policies. | <p>Wu's use of:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> body language (gestures, movements, facial expressions, mime/pantomime, dance, acrobatics and martial arts) provided a range of semiotic tools used for narrative and emotional expression. lyrical and performative aspects of <i>jingju</i> (infusing Shakespearean elements, body language, contemporary dialogue) to blur boundaries in <i>jingju</i> role types also questioned their rigidity and conformity pressures to identity tropes - personal, familial, national - and in the contemporary arts. |
| <p>Intercultural adaptation — to question and resist ingrained traditions, social hierarchization (artistic conventions) and embedded social stratifications</p> <p>– <i>What is the role of adaptation used in both plays?</i></p> | <p>1 Akbarabadi's persona/poetry and Shakespeare's <i>King Lear</i> were used as the foundational canvas, where historical parallels to audience reality were embedded in both texts.</p> <p>2. Further anchoring the works in <i>nacha</i> and <i>jingju</i> theatrical genres became a localization strategy.</p> | |
| <p>Cultural materialism – <i>How were the economic and socio-political environments of the play and of the time of its creation depicted and critiqued?</i></p> | <p>Tanvir drew parallels between the economic and political atmosphere of the post-Mughal era (when Akbarabadi wrote his poetry), and the post-British colonial era (current audience reality).</p> | <p>Wu drew parallels between the familial relationships in <i>King Lear</i>, Wu's relationship with Master Zhou and Taiwan's relationship with China.</p> |

| Nodal points + theoretical or strategic framework elements | <i>Agra Bazar</i> | <i>Li'er Zaici</i> |
|--|---|--|
| Goals | To question the role of linguistic hierarchization (ie. continued official use of English post-Independence, suppression of Urdu) and national language policies favouring Hindi – advocating instead for South Asia's pluralistic cultural fabric. | To raise questions around the rigidity of tradition related to identity construction (one's own, one's family, one's nation) and on creative expression in the contemporary arts. |
| Related strategies + tactics | Tanvir leveraged the pluralist cultural fabric of the region and its history by: 1. showcasing the linguistic pluralism of the region (Hindi, Urdu, Chhattisgarhi). 2. grounding <i>Agra Bazar</i> in artistic conventions of <i>nacha</i> theatre, as a mechanism: a) to facilitate regional narrative adaptation, and b) to broaden appeal/ strengthen audience resonance. 3. focusing on the Age of Urdu poetry at its height and alluding to the role court patronage had on the place of Urdu poetic forms within the social stratification. | Wu played with inherent situational juxtapositions by: 1. creating a contemporary fusion of <i>jingju</i> and Western theatrical traditions in <i>Li'er Zaici</i> . 2. his skillful use of the traditional Chinese artform – despite its own nationalistic associations amid the political tensions – to comment on themes of identity, loyalty, internal conflict, etc. 3. creating a one man show – playing many characters in <i>King Lear</i> as well as himself and a dog – to deepen commentary on the play's themes (particularly inner conflicts). 4. highlighting body language (incl. <i>jingju</i> , contemporary dance and everyday movements), for attitudinal infusions, and to blur boundaries between tradition and subversive interpretations of the <i>King Lear</i> text. |
| Tactics in narrative construction | <i>Mirrors:</i> 1. South Asia's social stratification was already interwoven in: a) the structures and history of Urdu poetic forms, and b) Akbarabadi's use of these forms to capture the popular imagination in his time. | <i>Mirrors:</i> 1. <i>King Lear</i> 's characters, embedded in <i>jingju</i> role types (further differentiated by the use of different <i>jingju</i> schools), simultaneously commented on Wu's personal-political crisis and Taiwan's struggles with China. |
| | 2. Where <i>Agra Bazar</i> predominantly employs mirrors and parallels, <i>Li'er Zaici</i> embeds juxtapositions within its mirrors to deepen the internal conflicts inherent in the work. | |
| | <i>Embraces ambiguity:</i> 3. Ambiguity in linguistic and performative usage (audiences unfamiliar with Chhattisgarhi and <i>nacha</i> performance conventions) leaves aspects of the play open to interpretation/misunderstanding. | <i>Embraces ambiguity:</i> 3. Construction allows wide open interpretations between: a) the Western adapted text, and b) how <i>jingju</i> theatrical conventions were distorted/ melded with other art forms or <i>jingju</i> schools, to strengthen character attributes or thematic commentary. |
| Outcome/Impact | <i>Agra Bazar</i> was felt by audiences to be a microcosm of South Asia's struggle to reclaim its own cultural narrative post-Independence. | <i>Li'er Zaici</i> was felt to be a poignant metaphor of Taiwan's own (familial-) national identity conflict with China. |

