

“The air we breathe, a forgotten colour”: Rajat Neogy and the *Transition* poems, 1961-1963

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Abstract

This essay revisits the years 1961-1963 through a selection of poems written by Rajat Neogy for *Transition* magazine. There is an inherent tension in Neogy's surrealism between its imaginative exposé of symbolic planes of abstract existence, and the distressing reality of post-Independent Uganda for the Asian expatriates. Avant-garde and ambitious, *Transition* was founded by Neogy in 1961 as an intellectually autonomous forum for East African literary culture. The magazine's cosmopolitan contributions reflected the cosmopolitan ambience of Kampala. Born in Kampala in 1938 to East Bengali immigrant parents, Neogy's writings are influenced by and reflect the anxieties of the expatriate communities unsure about their identity and status in the post-Independent scheme of things.

Keywords: Rajat Neogy, Surrealism, poetry, Uganda, Asians

How can anyone hope to order the chaos that
constitutes that infinite, formless variation: man?
(Tristan Tzara, 1918)

Introduction

In the early 1960s in Kampala, the “intellectually provocative” (Appiah et al. n.p.) *Transition* magazine published a number of avant-garde poems by its Bengali-Ugandan editor, Rajat Neogy (1938-1995). These poems have been described as “prose musings” or prose-poetry that offer surrealist insights into everyday happenings of a world gone awry. The overarching image that foregrounds Neogy's poetic vision is of the inexplicable futility of existence in a desensitized world of techno-scientific machinery and strained human relationships. Imbued with eccentric snapshots of hypnotic reveries, space is conceptualized in Neogy's oeuvre as relentless and unstable. Identifiable markers and human actors collide and collapse into one another, intensifying the chaos of this cosmic world order. Neogy's prose poems dismantle generic boundaries in what constitutes poetry and prose; they repudiate textual and semantic categorizations and refuse to be pinned down by neat, coherent narrative strategies. His narrators are otherworldly entities who resort to a kind of story-telling that eschews the conventional indicators that signpost development in plot, character, and setting.

Neogy's storytellers are faceless and nameless. They are often mere voices with no social, cultural, or national moorings. These fragmentary entities persevere



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in extraordinarily tumultuous circumstances. Conversely, there are no nostalgic rootedness in his poems to cartographic locations such as Bengal, Kampala, Africa, or Asia: places have no identifiable human markers. The objective of this paper is to explore these qualities of ambiguity and incongruity in Neogy’s writing.

Rajat Neogy was born in Kampala in 1938 to Bengali Brahmin parents who migrated from Faridpur to Uganda and found work as headmasters at Aga Khan schools in Kampala. There were about six Bengali families in the whole of Uganda in the 1930s (Benson 104). A few of these, such as the Calcutta-born K.D. Gupta, the Indian Education Officer for East Africa, were influential in the education sectors. It was due to the initiation of Gupta that Rajat Neogy was able to pursue higher studies at University College London in England in 1956 (though he did not complete his degree, for unspecified reasons).

Raised in a household that adhered to Brahmin traditions, he attended Catholic and Protestant Sunday schools in Kampala. When not in school, the Penguin translation of the *Quran* and the writings of the medieval mystic Meister Eckhart kept him intellectually occupied (Benson 104-105). According to the historian Peter Benson, by the age of seventeen Neogy had decided that, despite being what he called “a well-established atheist,” if he “were to choose a religion it would be Islam and no other,” a crucial proclamation for the Neogy-Bengal connection (105). In London, Neogy led a somewhat bohemian existence, reading profusely anything he could get his hands on according to his first wife, Charlotte Bystrom. It is likely in London during these years that Neogy picked up plans for an East African literary magazine.

As editor of *Transition* magazine, Rajat Neogy played a decisive role in the establishment of a vibrant platform for pan-African writing with an international and cosmopolitan reach in the 1960s (Benson; Kalliney; Desai). Most scholarly accounts of East African literary culture, however, forget that *Transition* facilitated Neogy’s poetic career. Materials published for the magazine were often in dialogue with Neogy’s poems and editorials on the socio-political climate of Uganda. A wide selection of writings by international scholars, artists, poets who published in *Transition* in the interval between 1961 and 1972 state egalitarian and ethical proclamations on individual freedom, development, and liberty. I argue that Neogy’s poems evoke a similar ideology of protest through Surrealist and Dadaist aesthetics.

This paper introduces readers to Rajat Neogy and to his poetry by revisiting the 1960s in Kampala where *Transition* and a whole host of artistic techniques, political ideals, and debates spawned a rich intellectual exchange between scholars from across Africa as well as India, Europe, and North America. This discussion, focused mostly on Neogy’s poems published in *Transition*, contends that the Surrealist bent in his poetry offers a poignant diagnosis of the socio-political climate of post-Independent

Uganda in the mid-twentieth century. The questions that follow are: can we write Neogy into narratives of Dada and Surrealism? Is it not possible to locate the psychic energy of his “prose musings” within Dadaist and Surrealist poetics in its rejection of the semiotic faculties of language to communicate meaning and the desire to bend semiotic capacities and dimensions to accommodate multiple, often conflicting, meanings of words and ideas?

“Why can’t a tree be called Pluplusch?”

Dada arose in Zurich in 1916 as an international artistic movement in reaction to the moral, material, and psychical damages in the aftermath of the First World War. Works produced by Dada’s adherents such as Marcel Duchamp, Tristan Tzara, and Raoul Hausmann, are deeply immersed in their opposition to bourgeois values. The peculiar and provocative visualizations of Dadaist collage and photomontage convey the delirium and disorientation of post-World War I. As the “artistic heir” to Dada, Surrealism as an aesthetic and literary movement in the early 1920s powerfully reflected a non-conformist commitment to the “irrational” and “absurd” of the post-War era mired as it was by the Great Depression, economic instability, imperialist-fascist hegemony and a general unease about the impending Second World War.

This paper is not an attempt to conflate Surrealism with Dada, neither is it about isolating the two; both movements share similarities and diverge significantly in their aesthetic choices and artistic proclamations. Surrealism as a school of thought, as “a community of ethical views” (Toyen 18), incorporates the iconoclasm and confrontational spirit of Dada, while being profoundly absorbed in the bizarre, the chaotic, and the fragmentary aspects of modern life. Whereas Surrealist art and poetry are absorbed by the “irrational” and the “absurd,” it is important to distinguish that Surrealism does not imply, in the words of Rosemont and Kelley, “unreality, antireality [and] the nonsensical” (3). What Surrealism signifies, and expands upon, is a heightened knowledge or awareness of reality that features unconventional and unusual elements of the real. Surrealism pertains to a kind of “open realism” where dualistic categories – real/unreal, conscious/unconscious, worldly/otherworldly – coexist (Gascoyne). A collective feature of Surrealist writing is the juxtaposition of outlandish similes that produce new aesthetic sensibilities as in Paul Eluard’s “earth blue as an orange” and in Breton’s “Free Union” that expands our awareness of the mysterious (and often, erotic) elements of everyday reality:

My wife with her figure of an otter between the tiger’s teeth ...
 My wife with temples the slate of a hothouse roof
 With eyebrows the edge of a swallow’s nest. (89)

There is a tendency in Dadaism to play with names and words, to tease out striking

neologisms so that Hugo Ball fittingly asks in his diary: “Why can’t a tree be called Pluplusch or Pluplubasch when it has been raining?” (Hopkins 64). Dadaist experimentations in phonetic and semantic possibilities (or impossibilities!) have produced startling poems, for instance, by Kurt Schwitters, who writes:

Greetings, 260 thousand ccm.
I thine,
thou mine,
we me.
And sun unboundedness stars brighten up.
Sorrow sorrows dew.
O woe you me!
Official notices:
5000 marks reward!’ (Hopkins 64)

Even before the publication of André Breton’s highly influential *First Surrealist Manifesto*, the movement was decidedly anti-bourgeois in spirit and, in certain circles, anti-Eurocentric in its ideological moorings. Prominent European Surrealists such as Antonin Artaud and André Masson decried white supremacist, racist, bourgeois, and imperialist viewpoints. The Greek Surrealist poet Nicolas Calas famously stated that “Surrealism after all is shocking for ... people who are shocked by dreams ... Surrealism looks for a transformation of the world” (391). This passion for transformation and insubordination to conformist narratives attracted international scholars from across the Afro-Caribbean regions such as Aimé Césaire and from across North and sub-Saharan Africa. The movement celebrated the works of French authors of African descent like Alexander Dumas. But the Surrealists’ “first black hero” was the eighteenth-century Haitian revolutionary Toussaint L’Ouverture, the leader of the only successful slave revolt in the history of modern times (Rosemont and Kelley 7). African culture and tribal art influenced the founders of the movement as early as 1919 with the appearance of African-American jazz music in Paris. Tribal artefacts from Africa were seen as “manifestations of visible poetry, objects imbued with spiritual energy” – antidotes to capitalist and imperialist hegemony in a post-War era (Rosemont and Kelley 8).

Although Rajat Neogy is not known to have stated his adherence to these avant-garde movements, his poetic style, especially its rejection of linguistic semiotic codes and exposition of startling imageries, fall within the broad spectrum of Surrealist and Dadaist writings. I argue that Neogy’s outlook on the social and political climate of the 1960s Uganda, his dissatisfaction with the post-Independent world order, together with his exceptional poetic modus operandi qualify him as a disciple of the Dadaist and Surrealist communities.

“Poetry – any good poetry,” writes Neogy in the third issue of *Transition* (1962):

are statements of men who have taken moral or spiritual positions in a world of material chaos. They are statements of facts of personal objectivity. No politician or pamphleteer can reach as near an all-embracing truth as the poet can if he is good. Good poetry is unadorned and unaffected, and is from the mainstream of the poet’s consciousness and experience. Its value ... is for the insight it affords into everyday happenings or for the new areas of experience it opens up. (2)

It is perhaps in his explication of “good” poetry seeking to “open up” – analogous to “open realism” – new areas of experience, that Neogy emerges as a Surrealist. It is in his poems that the full weightage of his borrowings from and contributions to Dada and Surrealism become prominent.

Neogy’s Poetic Vision

Neogy’s first poem for *Transition*, published in 1961, was “7T ONE = 7E TON” (hereon, “7T ONE”). While the title playfully conjures a mathematical equation, the complexity of the poem’s syntax produces an impassioned litany in a seemingly arbitrarily constructed language. A barrage of random images colliding in disarray inform “7T ONE” that begins almost in mid-conversation:

myriad existences forgotten over a tense past a vocabulary future full of new cooked meanings meaning meaning but nothing else. Very where every nothing happens which is the spitten curse of the image shadow of the tired sophisticates – those knowing who wait with knife and exquisite table top manners for the fried egg of love peppered with salt and a shot of tomato. (10)

Replete with double entendre, the poem plays with images that yield multiple, contesting readings. An obvious example is the knife: it belongs to the tableware (with which one eats the “fried egg of love?”), but it also registers as a weapon carried by the “tired sophisticates” who “wait with knife” – for self-defence or to inflict harm in a world already infiltrated by unfounded hostility? We are not exactly certain.

The despondency in the narrative, conveyed through the plaintive repetition of “nothing” and “nowhere,” is reflected in the latter half of “7T ONE” through a sterile autumnal scenery:

There, nowhere were pine tree tops which exhaled and inspired several odours of smelt desires lust-forgotten in dry leaves on an autumn beak of a bird’s hard kiss (10)

These visual aberrations denote something of an emotional wasteland divested of warmth even though disjointed remnants of passionate longings linger in “smelt desires lust-forgotten” (with a double connotation on “smelt,” i.e., “metallic,” conveying the sensation of cold or unfeeling) and in “bird’s hard kiss.” The vista on which this memory unfolds is dominated by acicular symbols: pine trees, birds’ beaks, and jagged knives. Whereas Surrealism and, to some extent, Dada, celebrate the eroticism of the female body (much to the chagrin of female scholars who point out the fetishization and objectification of the female body in such “masculinist” art [Rosalind Krauss; Susan Rubin Suleiman]) Neogy’s eroticism veers on the animalistic and primaeval with wonderfully peculiar descriptions of “armadillos in lost swamps,” “porcupine pleasures,” and “bird’s hard kiss.”

In the latter half of “7T ONE,” the narrative focuses on high-speed transportation by foregrounding the idea that technology enables and extends newer ways of experiencing movement and mobility. Technology enables information to travel quickly as well as for objects to move faster and farther in newer terrains that, in turn, opens newer ways of relating to ideas of space and place. This is best captured in “7T ONE” through a series of pithy imagist snapshots of “[t]ier after tier of fired wheels”; of “railway lines” sending telegraph messages and “silky parachutes” glistening like “serpents”; and the arrival of a “blue bus” hastily “[covering] kilometers,” while peroxide-covered fingers are “designing [a] telephone.” Then we hear snippets of a mundane telephone conversation as one speaker interjects with, “Operat[or] ... OBSERVE! Rate of removal was in itself unnecessary but of course they insisted. They would” (10).

This insipid telephone exchange somehow informs the poem’s outlook on the full-blown power of technology that relegates the role of humans as mere cogs in the machine, functional, fragmentary, and forgettable. The mechanization of man was a crucial leitmotif in Dada art. To that effect, Dadaists in Berlin and in New York developed human-machine hybrids called “mechanomorphs.” Marcel Duchamp famously defined the man-as-machine conjunction in his glass-art piece, *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even* (1915-23) where the human body is conceived as an engine that executes mechanistic tasks; romantic love, in Duchamp’s iconography, is concomitant to a set of mechanical errands. In Neogy, there is a discernible unease at the interface where man and machine meet, not as Duchampian “mechanomorphs” per se, but as unequal players with man surrendering to the might of the machine. Fingers and voices that perform operations replace the agency of humans as complete, organic entities. At times, even the fingers and voices disappear into oblivion while buses, parachutes, and railways exercise greater agency than human actors.

Visions of a desensitized world infiltrated by machines is terrifyingly evoked in “7T

ONE” through “singing pythons” strapped to “electric chairs.” There is a semiotic and phonetic conundrum between “singing” and “singeing,” amplifying the absurd enormity that the hissing sound of snakes singed by electricity should appear as a song. The suggestion is grotesque and may have been formulated by the poet as a critique of the cruelty inherent in the death penalty by electric shock therapy – all of which attest to a critique of the culture of human violence in the twentieth century. Machines are an allegory for modernity in “7T ONE” which highlights isolated episodes of technoscientific violence against man and nature as symptomatic of the twentieth-century drive for extreme transformations. With “pink avalanches” (akin to blood?) being “bellied out of the earth with the rumblings of running stones” and “jungles of sleeping-sickness” (10), it is as though nature has given up the will to live. Neogy’s poem offers a critique of technology as a threat to modern life.

The ubiquity of perceiving the world in its atomicity, down to its very molecular particularity, is conveyed later with “atomic pictures of X” (10). Needless to say, the word “atomic” in its twentieth-century context infers the industrialization of nuclear energies and military technology. “X” also has a wide range of references, from the multiplication symbol, the marker of cartographic location, to the Roman numeral ten, and so on. But taking a cue from mathematics, “X” is possibly a representation of the variable that denotes the “unknown” which ties in nicely with the overall nihilism of “7T ONE.”

Notwithstanding the imagistic commotion in “7T ONE,” there is a plot to the storyline. That the poem’s unconventional structure and chaotic reveries illustrate the irrationality of a man-made world may be a simplistic reading. But we can take this elementary reading as a point of departure to suggest that Neogy offers uncharacteristic ways of conceptualizing a world built on radical structures of causal change moored in both scientific and philosophical discourse. The poem’s underlying chaos conforms to the principles of Chaos Theory¹ which proposed, incidentally in the same year that Neogy published “7T ONE,” that seemingly ordinary phenomenon, from weather patterns to social behaviors, are stimulated by forces called “strange attractors” especially sensitive to conditions, however infinitesimal (Kellert). Such phenomenon can occur in either deterministic or arbitrary fashion, thereby questioning the measure of technological and scientific control humans exert over nature.

Neogy’s poem is replete with “strange attractors” colliding into forces that attract and detract turbulently, aptly captured in these lines from “7T ONE”

1 Chaos Theory is significant in the scientific study of predicting the effects of global climate change. According to Scott, “Prediction, or modelling” forms the governing tenet of the Chaos Theory, the aim of which was to contrast epistemologies in order “to imagine, quantify and qualify future courses [and] to calculate the new threats to society and the environment posed by industrial surprises such as global climate change” (6).

Railway lines sent telegraph messages and veils made virgins.
Some like sunlight in closed balls. Others open their eyes and
play with armadillos in lost swamps. Mosquito vibrations move
mountains and ants are licked and children dipped into acid. (10)

Irrespective of the illogical, if not violent, nature of the imagery, the proposition of mosquito vibrations moving mountains appeals to the most well-known model of Chaos Theory called the “butterfly effect.” This aspect of the theory argues that energy emanating from even a miniscule force (of a butterfly flapping its wings, for instance) in one part of the world could gather force to stimulate a bigger energy farther away.

Physical and non-physical forces converge arbitrarily in “7T ONE” where nothing is predictable or knowable, hence the “singing pythons,” serpents in “parachute silk,” and women with “seeing hair.” To perceive a fundamental disharmony between reality and expectation is to discern very little that is meaningful or valuable in human life, hence the futile search and re-search for “new ... meanings meaning meaning but nothing else” (10). Neogy’s language is a rhetoric of emasculation that articulates the nullity and pessimism of a man-made world where “nothing happens,” “nothing means anything,” and where “nothing is.” In “7T ONE”’s gratuitous world of “dead revolutions” and failed relationships, a minute feels like an “h/our” – “In a minute. An Hour. Ours is the same” (10).

The poem’s experimental syntax, grammar, and occasionally, spelling (“unposing,” “spitten,” “furlined”), test the extent to which language can cohere to convey meaning. Neogy seems to have carefully meditated on the extraordinary meaning-making possibilities of linguistic codes through figures of speech, like similes, metaphors, alliterations (“Serpents glisten like parachute silk”), homonyms (“Hour/Our”; “Aim. Am. I am”), playful metonymies and curious circumlocutions often in a single sentence (“Hair-oil is good for the brain and soap is good for the bones”), and so on. The poem is replete with wonderfully peculiar lines, practically impossible to decipher, but are visually and auditorily magnificent:

Also there the juice of a tange beyond O in a bottle with libel ... Aim. am.
I am.
Ham-riders in porcupine pleasure of standing on end, mushroom-grown in
mois.Ture was there too. (10)

The disintegration of literary English usually portends a breakdown of linguistic codes. However, a breakdown in conventional linguistic codes does not necessarily herald a complete loss of meaning because it invites the possibility that an object, idea, or image can have multiple significations and newer, different arrangements as linguistic symbols. The word “mois.Ture” is a case in point: pictographically, it

is unique because the breakage plays with our perceived notions of recognizable linguistic characters. The period between “mois” and “Ture” creates a striking visual effect by way of an ideographic peculiarity: it is difficult to overlook, let alone forget. But the real conundrum is how does or should it sound? The inclination is not to pause after “mois” when read aloud, so that when the pause does take place, it not only alters the (expected) sound-effect, but the meaning of the word/s altogether because “Ture” then hovers about on the page (and on the reader’s mind) as a truncated after thought: “mois.Ture” is and is not “moisture,” so what is it then?

Is this a Dadaist attempt by Neogy, of hacking words and rearranging them, an effort to remove language from our preconceived notions about coherence, order, and normalcy? Surrealists and Dadaists despised coherence and regularity in art and fiction, a proclamation underscored with great emphasis by Breton in the *First Surrealist Manifesto*. Literary and narrative elements used to convey coherence in form and structure were completely eradicated in Dada poetry and art and Surrealist fiction. Such works often produced arbitrary juxtaposition of words and symbols meant to jolt the reader/viewer’s expectations and conformist views. In Dada and Surrealism, the mind is prevented from going through language in the usual way because this meant slipping back into time. Mental comprehensions were regarded as a linear act in time, so that if this could be halted, then words and images become fragmentary and could then convey the fragmentary and shifting nature of human consciousness – itself mysterious, unknowable, and uncanny, the seat of both affirmative and destructive impulses. No wonder then that European Dadaists and Surrealists read a great deal of Nietzsche, Bergson, and Freud.

Fragmentation of senses, of body parts, and words in much twentieth-century avant-garde movements generally convey the fragmentation of human sensibilities and we can assume that Neogy employed similar truncated words and images in his poetry to play with the idea that human perception is volatile and arbitrary, and human nature, even more so. He wants his reader to not merely read the poem (aloud if possible, because sound is crucial for this “meaning-making” venture), but to dwell on the poem’s visual layout, to ponder on the arrangement of words and punctuation, and muse on the deliberate caesuras: he is teasing the reader but also, in a way, setting her/him free from conformist and conventional viewpoints.

Travel, Im/mobility, Exile

Freedom in motion and movement are important leitmotifs in Neogy’s later poems where narrators travel unassisted by machine and technological contraptions. Bodily motion as opposed to rootedness is one way to counter the prevailing chaos of the human cosmos. Movement is restorative; it invites meditation and possible regeneration of the self. While some of his traveller-narrators are quasi-

human entities, others are mere voices or snatches of a memory-laden consciousness that reminisce in a monotone. It is difficult to discern what it is that moves across time and space in these later poems. We do not know who or what travels across the unspecified terrains of a space so vast that one location captures the essence of all locations and all spaces. This type of poetry offers powerful glimpses of the omniscient “I” that moves about in an ur-space that is everywhere and yet seemingly nowhere.

The second issue of *Transition* (1961) published three untitled poems by Neogy, this time less experimental but more prophetic in its revelatory litany. The first poem opens with the preambles of a quasi-human first-person narrator, who circumnavigates water, land, and air:

Many times, too many times ...
I have walked
with tobacco ash in my pocket
and an emptiness in my bare feet.
... with my muscles
Rippling like s stream
And the noiseless sound of brook water
I have glided with flesh and my legs
And I have travelled. (37)

The narrator experiences a primeval integration with the earth:

I have slept
and watched grass growing
and tasted greenness with my teeth
and sweetness with my tongue
and I have kissed the earth.
And I have slept.
.....
I have brewed my liquid
and eaten meat.
I have seen birth
and witnessed death.
Many times, too many times.
But today I have seen men:
And I will beat the earth with my two fists. (37)

The journey ends here on a note of anguish at having “seen men.” Who these “men” are and what “seeing” implies are left ambiguous. Travel is a self-evident metaphor

for a spiritual quest or pilgrimage that enables the finding of a kind of “non-self” (as a primal, non-material life-force) in the everyday self. Movement is a disembodied experience in Neogy. But the question subconsciously gnawing at Neogy’s narrator, a question asked by all Surrealist storytellers is – “who am I?” Both Dadaism and Surrealism have pondered on, in their respective ways, questions of identity, the relationship between the body and mind, and the nature of human consciousness.

The third untitled poem extrapolates on the idea of paralysis, for here, the prophetic narrator is rendered immobile. Having reached an impasse, the narrator’s seeming immobility – an idea that has broader social implications throughout Neogy’s editorials in the 1960s – contends that arrival is difficult to grapple with than departure. Such travelers are:

... paralyzed by the
 rectangular symbol of the door
 A kind of purgatory between
 outside and in. (37)

Neogy complicates implications behind “arrival” by associating it with the Catholic doctrine of expiatory purification. Arrival attests to a state of paralysis rather than emancipation for those who:

travel
 who arrive
 and stand at the entrance
 and cannot move
 anymore. (37)

Neogy and the “Asian Question”

I argue that arcane and surrealist visualizations of movement and im/mobility in Neogy’s poetry reflect much broader and urgent questions on the possible relocation and impending exile for the Asian community in Uganda. The date of publication of these poems is November 1961, exactly eleven months before the formal declaration of the Independence of Uganda. Independence was a historic moment and Milton Obote, the leader of the Uganda People’s Congress, announced plans to “Africanize” Uganda with the support of the expatriate communities in their commercial undertakings. Obote declared that “there is a place in the Uganda of today for all who have her interests at heart, whatever their tribe, race or creed” (Nsubuga 68-69). The country entered a new phase of organizational overhaul wherein administrative control was to be transferred from expatriates to the African sons of the soil. Despite such affirmative words of hope and encouragement on the eve of Independence, the actual identity and status of the many expatriate groups

were deliberately left obscure by the Obote government.

Themes of travel and im/mobility in Neogy’s writings have special connotations when read in light of the escalating tension that was gathering around debates on the place of the Asian population in Independent Uganda. The urgency of the situation was not lost on *Transition’s* Ugandan-Bengali editor whose *bhadrolok* (literally, genteel) *Brahmin* parents had come from Faridpur (then East Bengal) to Kampala in the 1930s as expatriate teachers at the Aga Khan school. Could Asians choose to remain as expatriates in the new nation state or would they be conferred citizenship and indefinite leave to remain in the country which they had begun to call home?

Neither was the urgency of the matter lost on *Transition’s* expatriate subscribers and contributors who furiously debated the government’s ambiguous stance towards these communities. Would “Africanization” in governmental, administrative, and educational divisions completely curtail expatriate participation in these sectors since many Asians, such as Neogy’s parents, were teachers at schools in Kampala? Would Asians be required to hand over their civil positions, business enterprises, and properties to Africans after Independence? How would they then sustain themselves? These questions and many more became a matter of great apprehension in the months following Independence. Whereas Neogy remained discreet about the expatriate situation in his poetry, he saw to it that *Transition* continually published fictional and non-fictional materials on the “Asian Question” and on the political climate of Uganda by himself and other notable contributors, expatriate and African.

Attentive to the expatriate anxiety, legally and affectively, the third issue of *Transition* featured publications on the political climate of post-Independent Uganda, and essays on “race relations” between Africans and Indian expatriates. The issue was prefaced by a poignant editorial by Neogy on “Race Attitudes.” The editorial argued that of all the expatriate groups in Uganda, Indians were the most hated, and that Indians are responsible for “the strong and widespread anti-Indian prejudice which exist among Africans.” Neogy was not alone in this condemnation. The Kenyan novelist and poet, Bahadur Tejani, who spent considerable time in Uganda, was quite moved by the expatriate situation. Born to Gujarati parents and raised all over East Africa, he remarked in an essay called “Farewell Uganda,” published by Neogy, that whereas expatriates born in Uganda had a “birthright” as citizens, Indians’ discrimination of Africans was largely responsible for their fall-out with the Obote and Idi Amin regimes. But both Tejani and Neogy believed that in spite of their many shortcomings, Indian-Ugandans would cooperate under the new regime, and therefore, be accepted as citizens in the new nation. Neogy is among a handful of African intellectuals who believed that Asian expatriates, especially Indians and Bengalis, would contribute positively to Uganda’s nation-building initiatives.

The November 1961 issue of *Transition* tackled the “Asian Question” by printing controversial essays on the future of Uganda by Daudi Ochieng, J. E. Goldthorpe, and Bill Court. The issue also brought out poems by Roland Hindmarsh on the existential ennui of the wearied Asian émigré who “shuffles groceries into cartons” in a “crude African town” (6-7). These poems – with striking thematic parallels to some of Neogy’s poems – probe into the expatriate nightmare of failing to find a home away from home in Africa. Most Asian expatriates in Uganda never “belonged” to the new nation-state in that they did not feel the need to integrate with Africans or treat them as equals; neither did they look forward to exile, having invested time and resources in setting up trade, commerce, and work in Kampala and the neighboring cities. The collective expatriate angst was perhaps tantamount to the feeling of being paralyzed (by fear, anger, uncertainty, hopelessness) that Neogy’s later poems on immobility extrapolate. The implication is that there is no home to be reached and no destination to be sought for one who travels, suggesting that life itself is a protracted and perpetual journey experienced as a collation of movements. For Neogy, im/mobility and movement can result in regeneration, but also purgatory. The tension he builds in the poems around the mysterious notions of im/mobility foreshadow expatriate angst about their place in Uganda which was becoming increasingly untenable and surreal.

In 1962, *Transition* printed a short and startling poem by Neogy called “Definitions.” The poem re-enacts the travel motif through seven brief sections that juxtapose a series of words, from “Dignity” to “Death.” For each word, a “definition” is presented by the narrator that recounts, rather morbidly, the journey of life from the period of conception to bodily death. The poem, in true Dadaist and Surrealist fashion, toys with violence around the person of a pregnant woman – a rarity in Neogy’s oeuvre where definite human figures are uncommon. But the woman is a disconcerting figure for she is knowingly carrying a “wounded child in [her] womb” while a nightmarish scene unfolds around her with “brains [lying] dashed, dribbling on slopes” (14), bleeding eyes and wounded fetuses.

Written four months before the official declaration of the Independence of Uganda, it is perhaps not altogether fortuitous to consider that the image of the “wounded child” and of its enfeebled mother offer a diagnosis of the collective national condition on the eve of Independence. According to Simon Gikandi, the new social order that sprung up in the aftermath of Independence in East Africa heralded a moment of “stillborn postcolonial modernity” (163), perhaps as “stillborn” as Neogy’s “wounded foetus” which ushers in the concept of the nation-as-mother. Neogy does not develop this analogy of the female body as a figurative marker for ideas of nation and national identity to satisfactory conclusions. The female body *is* the nation, but his emphasis is on fetal casualty as an allegory of national casualty

with the implication that Uganda is entering a fragile period of its history. Many questioned whether Uganda would persevere in this new journey to independent nationhood.

Conclusion

The unspoken but consistent referent in Rajat Neogy’s early Surrealist poetry is a loss of meaning in existence as a result of technological machinations, psychological disarray, and spatial displacement and/or homelessness. Images of trains, railroads, and leitmotifs of arrivals and departures offer tropes that would have struck a familiar and eerie chord with *Transition*’s Indian expatriate readers in light of the socio-political changes taking place in post-Independent Uganda. Neogy’s decision to publish essays on the “Asian Question” in his magazine is an indication of his own and the Asian community’s mounting anxiety of having to consider their status as “non-citizens” in a country where many, like Neogy, were born and raised.

In true Surrealist tradition, Neogy’s poems bombard us with a bewildering medley of imagist snapshots of a world in discernible disarray. This world, we discover, is a fearsome labyrinth: infinitely complex, chaotic, and capricious, much like human consciousness and human nature. In the post-Second World War industrial era of Cold-war politics, Neogy perhaps felt that the old certainties – of religion, family, society – were fast disappearing. His poems reveal the disruptive influence of science, technology, military, and political prowess on the individual who is flayed about like a fish out of water by forces beyond her/his control. To give poetic expression to these incomprehensible feelings of loss and amnesia, the poet discards basic elements of rhythm, harmony, and linguistic conventions. The end result is a verbal experiment so bewildering and jarring that it is as though language itself has refused to accommodate conventional meaning and is looking for outlets to generate new meanings. The energy and aesthetics behind “7T ONE” is as breathtaking as it is mystifying. It is alarming to visualize the aggressiveness inherent in Neogy’s graphic narratives that are infiltrated by a riotous disarray of images superimposed against a mad surrealist backdrop of cosmic disintegration where, without visibility and adequate representation as subjects, his narrative personae move about like spectres haunted by their own apparitions. Everything, from language to imageries and sound, is disorientating in this surrealist cosmos, which becomes a reflection of the disorientating human nature so that “meaning-making” in the human realm remains unstable.

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