

[1]Metaphor and Motive in Bangladeshi Ricksha Art*

A Burkean Reading

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Kenneth Burke—writer, critic and literary philosopher—wrote about literature as symbolic action, a concept which he developed in his two famous works, *A Grammar of Motives* and *A Rhetoric of Motives* (1962). I have always found his approach to rhetoric provocatively useful, and here I apply it as one possible way to read the rhetoric of art, which as we know is as rhetorical as written literature (see, for example, Berger, 1972; Hadjinicolau, 1978; and Barthes, 1972a, in the bibliography). Burke was a modernist. His vision of rhetoric was both Platonic, in terms of his interest in terms which summed things up (e.g., "god terms," see below), and Aristotlean, in that his arguments which fell short of summary reduction were relative to a speaker's or writer's, even a tribe's or culture's, individual and social placements.

Ahead of his time, Burke conceived of the symbolic order of writing, or written action, as dramatistic. For example, he wrote:

To be sure, relativism is the constant *temptation* [his emphasis] of either dialectic or drama...where one considers different historical characters from the standpoint of a total development, one could encourage each...to comment upon the others without thereby sacrificing a perspective upon the lot. This could be got particularly, I think, if historical characters themselves (i.e., periods or cultures treated as "individual persons") were considered never to begin or end, but rather to change...History, in this sense, would be a dialectic of characters...(1962:513; author's emphasis).

In these ways, he was also post-modern.

For Burke, rhetoric concerned the social "Scramble". He viewed the study of rhetoric in literature as a gesture toward ending "war," by which he meant resolving and mediating difference. Burke was no cynic. He was a romantic social idealist, who seems to have thought, at least in the two works just noted, that "war" could be both analyzed and appeased. Language being not a material thing but a symbolic system, his idealism moved him to brilliantly conceive of rhetoric as addressing grand problems and designs of symbolic order, not merely rhetoric as the "art" of persuasion. He said of his *Rhetoric* that "...problems of definition and placement that were treated in the *Grammar* become transformed into a concern with the terministic marvels that have to do with the magic and rationality of Order, and its corresponding modes of identification." Concluding his introduction to the *Rhetoric*, he wrote, "I have tried to show that Rhetoric, as so conceived, lends itself particularly well to those areas where sociological and literary speculation overlap" (ibid.:523). Thus, the platonic terms of Order and the Scramble play out their dialectics on an Aristotlean stage.

As ricksha art is highly theatrical in its expressions, and as my approach to the understanding of them is moved and enriched by the need to see them symbolically in their social placements—commenting upon one another or asserting their individual roles—I have found Kenneth Burke to be my man.

As part of his studies in motives, he suggested the notion of the "god term" (1962:830), a summary term of maximum generalization. The god term is placed "at the apex of a dialectical pyramid," which could if needed sum up all of the more proximate terms in a particular analysis. Here is an example of how the god term works. In *Rhetoric*, Burke cites a speech by Winston Churchill, who said that "...I feel as if I were walking with Destiny..." Here the term Destiny rhetorically sums up everything Churchill experienced before he reached the crucial point which occasioned this speech. For him, Destiny would symbolically sum up his life and action from that moment on (1962:830).

In the comparative study which follows, I have found Burke's notion of the god term useful. Indeed, such rhetorical terms are literally applied on an everyday basis by ordinary people in Bangladesh when they speak of deities or of fate controlling their lives. Ordinary Bangladeshis do not expostulate, "It's the economy, stupid!" (as uttered by U.S. President Bill Clinton ca. 1991), although that sort of characterization is part of *my* analysis as an outside observer. It could be said that the political-economy stands as *my* god term.

In this essay I shall compare and contrast two different types of ricksha art thematics: the waterhole or "jungle picture" (*jongler chitra*) and the movie or "people picture" (*manusher chitra*), considered under the rhetorical rubrics of metaphor and motive. To enlarge the argument and provide cultural contrast, I introduce into the discussion another version of visual rhetoric, an example of one of many *Peaceable Kingdom* pictures painted by the nineteenth century American artist, Edward Hicks.

The waterhole picture, one of several types of animal conflict scenes, began to appear some time during the mid-seventies, when ricksha art proliferated in the aftermath of the Bangladeshi liberation war with Pakistan (1971-72). Waterhole scenes (called *jongler shiin*, or jungle scene) in the seventies featured animals confronting one another across a body of water—a lake or river. A variation might show two different animals threatening to attack one another, with one animal already in the water (such as a crocodile versus a lion or tiger. The artists were quite good at depicting their body language). This theme suggests to me the prevalent threat of scarce resources, signifying contention and competition over necessities or the desired things of life. This was a time before the consolidation of newly rich upper classes and national involvement in the global capitalist economy. It was a time when the welfare of an ordinary man and his family was subject as much to good, or bad, luck as it was to the looming new economic forces only then dimly perceived by the ordinary villager or poor tradesman.

Waterhole Scene, ca. 1978



Ricksha backboard painting. Photo ©Joanna Kirkpatrick

The river or lake separating the contending animals fits well with the classic south Asian metaphor of the river as *samsara*, the human condition of conflicting and competing desires, of limited good. (Samsara is a Sanskrit term; both Bengali Muslims and non-Muslims recognize it as *shongsaar*, meaning family and/or wordly life). Both communities share the concept of the river as a poetic or spiritual metaphor of life's obstacle course, to be crossed over on the way to union with God, or release from rebirth. One is reminded that the English word "rival" derives from the Latin *rival-is*, originally meaning one living on the opposite bank of a stream from another. Even the word *river* in English participates in the sense of cleaving asunder. It separates (as in *riven*, divided), as does the word *rivalry*. By employing the banks of a lake or river in their scenic arrangements, the ricksha artists' transmission of rivalrous attitudes to the English-speaking viewer accidentally, but felicitously, fits with a language (English) which was at that time unknown to most of them.

Rivalry is a governing and compelling emotion within the Bangladeshi body politic, as it is wherever one finds the "image of limited good" in scarcity economies; envy is its subjective counterpart. Besides myself, other observers (see, e.g., Bertocci, 1980), including many ordinary Bangladeshis, say that villagers and

ordinary Bangladeshis tend to view the social world as governed by *hingsha*, envy, e.g., one man's loss is another man's gain. A man might win a fine harvest one year, and lose all his land to the jaws of flood or to the creditor the next. He might come to the city with one cycle ricksha, painstakingly hoisted to the roof of a train for a free trip to the capital, and then lose it to a thief. Up one year, down the next. Thus, the waterhole scene stands as a visual metaphor of struggle in a limited, subsistence economy where success or luck invites envy. In my symbolic reading of the image, there are no permanent winners or losers. Its rhetoric could be summarized by what Burke would call the god term—destiny, or *taakdir*. Its thematic motive might be called *The Way Things Are*, an image of the impersonal laws of Nature and Destiny which victimize or reward men regardless of their actions.

It is semiotically interesting to compare and contrast the ricksha art waterhole scene of the seventies, as described above, with an early American painter's work, the *Peaceable Kingdom* pictures of Edward Hicks (1780-1849), a devout Pennsylvanian Quaker. "Hicks received no formal artistic training. ... [his] *Peaceable Kingdom* pictures were 'painted sermons'" (Thorpe, 1996:510). Hicks, who painted sixty-two known pictures on this theme (Weekley, 1999:4), had his own readings, (which I shall consider in the study that follows this one, titled "Peaceable Kingdoms"). Here, I shall indulge my own reading of the pictures, taking them as metaphors not of Quakers in spiritual conflict and struggle, as they were for Hicks, but as visual metaphors of the new American world a-coming. As Hicks said in a sermon of 1827, speaking on the evolution of both man and country:

"...in this happy land of America, [man's] advancement has been peculiarly striking...what changes and improvements present themselves on every side...What are we not blessed with in this land, that flows as it were with milk and honey." (Ford, 1985:57)

This description of his native land shows that he believed in America as a land of unlimited bounty.

Hicks, like many other artists of his time, (and also like many ricksha painters), began his career as a sign and coach painter. He had a regular business doing this type of work while he was simultaneously a Quaker minister. Hicks's work techniques resemble those used today by Bangladeshi ricksha and poster artists: "...stylized forms, ...strong sense of design, flat decorative colours and careful lettering were all derived from sign painting." Like ricksha artists, he used popular prints as references. "These were then translated into Hicks's own naive decorative style." (All quotes from Thorpe, 1996.)

The *Peaceable Kingdom* pictures were inspired by prophetic verses in the Book of Isaiah (11:6-9) of the Old Testament. Hicks painted many variations on this scene of wild and domesticated animals assembled peaceably together on one bank of a river, while across a slender waterway or distinctly demarcated gully the Quaker leader William Penn is concluding his "Indian treaty" of 1682 with a band of Native American Delawares. The pictures propose the beatitude of fierce, potentially aggressive wild animals, mixed and mingled at peace with domestic ones. As written in Isaiah's prophecy, leading the animals (pictorially often grabbing the lion's mane; in the example selected here, the infant seems to be clutching the hide of a puma with his left hand while his right hand rests on a sheep) is a "little child," suggestive of the baby Jesus, a Christian sign of peace among the nations.

Edward Hicks, *The Peaceable Kingdom*



Photo © Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco

My reading of Hicks's series proposes that, as in the example shown here, a slender ribbon of water divides the mystical animal from the human world, similar to the waterway which divides the animals in the ricksha art waterhole scene, (1) but here the two worlds do not contend. Hicks's river leads off into the distance and toward the sunlight, perhaps the western sun, emblematic of the westward movement of the American population toward expectations of land and riches. In this peaceable kingdom, a ship which has just disgorged men with boxes of trade goods, cloth in particular, waits in the stream. Perhaps it came from the east with its trade goods—the motion is still "westward, ho." The men are showing rolls of dry goods to the Indians, signifying the commercial nature of treaty making with native Americans in general, as well as suggesting a bountiful business future for the settlers. (There are additional figures in the example shown here which do not count in my reading: see note 2.) Hicks's peaceable kingdom themes can thus be read as visual metaphors of *unlimited good* (as contrasted with the Bangladeshi waterhole scene as an image of *limited good*). Hicks's thematic motive in these pictures could be construed as *The Way Things Will Be* for the Americans of his time.

His visual concept somewhat resembles the arrangement of a waterhole scene, but it also differs. The Bangladeshi samsara concept (*The Way Things Are*) signifies timelessness or a cyclical reality, while a futuristic dimension constructs the American concept. In Hicks's scene, things will not forever be the same. They are motivated in the direction of that era's god term, *Progress*, still the ur-motif so to speak of the United States of America and of its predominant capitalistic economy.

Turning now to the ricksha art people pictures (*manusher chitra*), we find a different but related set of significations. People pictures are mostly based on movies. Dhaka has long had a thriving film industry, creating its own stories, or re-staging stories based on Bengali and Hindi films in India. These pictures usually include heroines juxtaposed with male leads, one of whom is often the villain. His face used to be painted in shades of green, darkish blue or purple, although the prevalent mode in the late nineties seems to favor depicting all movie star faces in a garish, reddish pink.

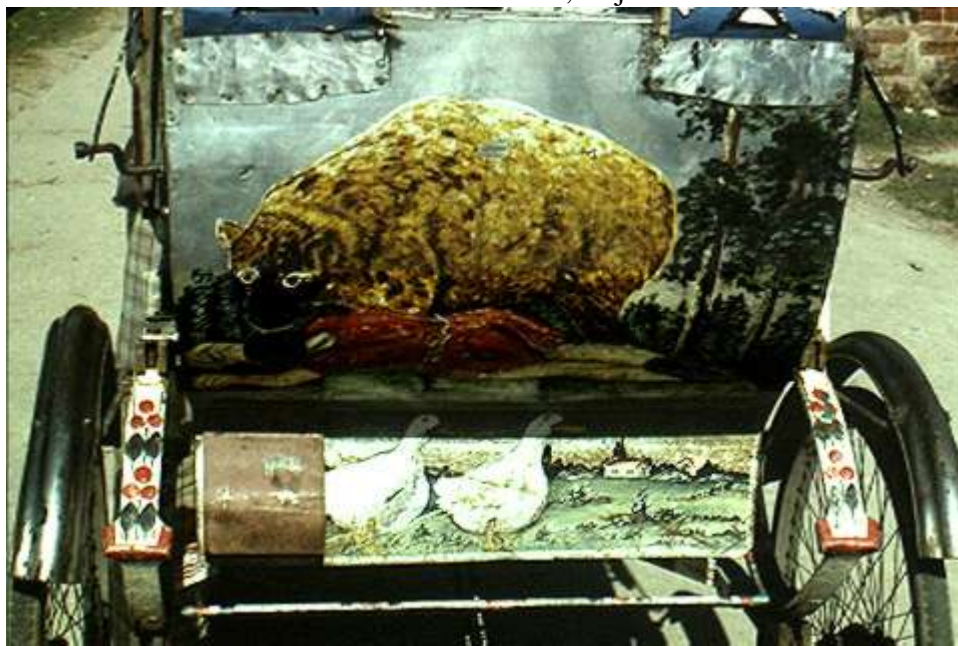
Greenfaced 'Heavy', two heroines. Seatback Painting, Dhaka 1982



Photo © Joanna Kirkpatrick

The themes of popular films (as opposed to art films, not many of which have been made in Bangladesh) usually stress either the eventual union of lovers, or male revenge. During the waterhole scene decade (the seventies), female movie star figures were mainly portrayed as sexy temptresses or devastated victims.

Bear Attacks Prone Woman, Rajshahi 1976



Back of a ricksha painting. Photo © Joanna Kirkpatrick

In the eighties, the range of narratives had expanded to include danger-woman heroines, like the Bandit Queen Fulon (Phulan in India, where the living bandit queen ruled the bandit roost for a while). As a young male student commented, "We love to see beautiful women holding a knife." (Interpreting that image belongs to another essay.) Heroines from abroad, such as Lal Memsahib (see picture below), also appeared as romantic objects. In the movie titled "Lal Memsahib," for example, a young, beautiful Englishwoman comes to Dhaka, meets a Bengali boy, and they fall in love. The emphasis on love or lust motifs continues right up to the present. It seems to have obliterated the thematic variety that once appeared in ricksha arts. I have not seen these films, but people in Dhaka told me about them. Dhaka films, like Indian Bollywood films, are generally neither subtle nor profound (see Kabir, 1979).

Danger-Woman, Rajshahi 1987



Ricksha backboard painting. Photo © Joanna Kirkpatrick

Woman Insouciant, Man Battle-Scarred, Dhaka 1982



Ricksha backboard painting. Photo© Joanna Kirkpatrick

Lal Memsahib, Rajshahi 1987



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I read the wildly popular *filmi* (movie) poster and ricksha art eroticism as a visual metaphor of the “union of the desirer with the desired.” Their thematic motive could perhaps be stated as *The Way Things Ought To Be*, a motive based not on an economic scarcity model but on the psychic model of frustrated sexual desire, of scarcity in the male sexual economy, so to speak. (In this regard, these films and their motifs are little different from their formulaic counterparts in the West.) With this theme there are only winners and losers. The popularity of movies and movie pictures in Bangladesh, where the expression of eroticism is constrained by public display-rules of good manners and piety, could be accounted for in the yearnings of men (and nowadays

perhaps of women as well) for more erotic experience than they could ever hope for in their everyday lives, given the prevailing Islamic religious standards and the general material impoverishment. (See Ahmed, 1990, and quote below.)

This is not to say that libidinal license does not occur, nor that all men (or women) are sexually suppressed. According to some respondents, there is a profitable Dhaka trade in pornographic videos, magazines, and the like. Prostitution is also available. But there is a *mystery* embedded in popular culture which invites observation.

As Burke has written, mystery appears in the rhetoric of encounter between differences—genders and social classes, for example. The classic assertion of gender difference and, therefore, mystery in Islamic societies, which stimulates the frustrated male sexual economy, is the custom of *hijab*, or seclusion of women. (3) It is the secluded woman who stands for and signifies above all other signs, the frustrated sexual genesis of the motive, *The Way Things Ought To Be*. A male Bangladeshi student of mine once said that, when a fellow woman student wore a *borka*, far from being intimidated by it, he just felt the urge to walk up to her and tear it off. Filmi female gender opulence (plump, hip-wagging, breast-bulging beauties in a country where the majority of women are bone thin), all the more seductive because unattainable, hooks the viewer's desire. I would therefore construe the god term or summary motive which characterizes the immediate rhetoric of the cinema, and of its poster and ricksha art progeny, as Desire or wish fulfillment, exemplified in the following illustration:

Lady in Red (painted hood), Lovers (backboard). Dhaka 1998



Photo © Joanna Kirkpatrick

Let us now move our interpretive strategy, from considering eroticism in cinematic space to consumerism. Why should we make such a move? If, with Kenneth Burke, we take the cinematic mystery of winners and losers in romance as a signifier of the hierarchical motive in social relations, then we find ourselves in the

presence of property relations. We are in the circle of having and not having. Erotics in the movies are inevitably set amidst a *mise en scene* of grand scenery and hyperbolically luxurious Bollywood-style sets. Consumer goods are liberally displayed in the form of expensive autos, fancy phones of various sorts, palatial mansions, gorgeous clothes and ornaments, hairstyles, and furniture. Most ordinary people, those for whom ricksha art is meaningful or pleasurable, could only dream of such luxuries. These are the prerogatives of the rich: thus, in Burke's terms, the mystery of class.

Considering the centrality of the erotic motive in advertising (as is well-known, ads are designed to stimulate desires; they regularly employ erotic symbolism to reinforce these aims), and considering movies as a form of "cultural advertising," I would argue that people pictures in ricksha art—as they represent the union of the desirer with the desired through their narratives, cinematic or implied—they accompanied and validated the social development of individualistic wealth and power seeking which got under way in the eighties and continues to expand exponentially in the economy. In movies, as in ads, people stand for objects and objects for people, as winners and losers in the exacerbated social struggle. Writing in the late eighties, Rafiuddin Ahmed wrote:

In fact, the society in Bangladesh has never been economically so much divided as now. The condition of the poor in the countryside is worsening day by day...There are hardly any roads, lights, or pure water; the people are being constantly pushed out of their homesteads by the richer elements of the society, forcing them to seek shelter in the over-crowded slums of the towns. They have little scope for educating their children or even feeding them properly. All these facilities are geared towards the needs of a fraction of the population—the middle and upper-middle classes...The entire system is based on the thinking that "if you are poor and illiterate, we have no need for you; we do not even need your votes, for it is we who manage the voting system."...less than 5 percent of the total population enjoy a life of ease and luxury, comparable to the standard of the middle class in most western countries... (1990:30)

Kenneth Burke showed that erotic relations often signal the rhetoric of social difference and hierarchy, where those below solicit those above, and vice versa (1962:638-639). As he said, "Private property and the division of labor are identical. This is an important *situational* fact [his emphasis], since it leads to...'mystifications' in the realm of ideas." (Ibid., 631). Here I would substitute for "the realm of ideas," the realm of cinema enjoyment. Burke wrote:

At every significant point where there is an economic factor to be faced, ..."ideology" produces an "illusion."...Where empires are striving for world markets, [we] are "ideologically" inclined to ponder the ways of "universal spirit." (Ibid., 632)

Here, I translate "universal spirit" to be signified by "romance," the great mystification. Burke's citation of world markets at the time he first published this book, in 1950 (he a neo-Marxist before the neos of today), is surely prescient in relation to post-colonial scenes undergoing influences from and integration into global markets. Whether pondering the "ways of universal spirit" or, as in the case of Bangladeshi cinema and filmi art themes, pondering the ways of romance, Burke's point stands. However, when reading the images of ricksha art, perhaps we should not simply leave it at desire or wish fulfillment and its objects.

I spoke earlier of waterhole scenes suggesting chronological stasis and the *Peaceable Kingdom* picture of chronological progress. To conclude this set of visual readings, the implied *agon* or contest of the waterhole scene is as Time-less in its no-win combat as the American peaceable kingdom image is Time-ful in its no-combat everybody-wins significations. The manusher chitra or people pictures are also Time-ful, but implicated in the rhetoric of a contest won or lost, of winners and losers. As such they stand for, reinforce, and validate Bangladesh's class struggle and its social and gender hierarchies.

Notes

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1) In some of Hicks's peaceable kingdom pictures, instead of a clearly depicted, if narrow, waterway between the two halves of the scene, there is a dry gully. I picked this image to more easily make my point. A dry gully could work just as well, but it would be less esthetically appealing.

2) Besides the "little child" who will "lead them," this example also includes a young girl beside an eagle. The symbolism of this latter combination figure is idiosyncratic to Hicks and need not detain my reading of the peaceable kingdom in this article.

3) Secluding Muslim women in Bangladesh within "the four walls," e.g., the residence, has been characteristic, in different behavioral manifestations, of both the gentry class and other social classes, including village women if their men can financially afford to keep them within the compound (for more on village women, see Arens and van Beurden, 1977, and Blanchet, 1984). In the seventies one did not see many women wearing borkas on the streets, partly because one did not see many women in the streets, period. In the eighties, as the result of intensifying Arab-style Islamization in Bangladesh, borkas began to appear more frequently on women in public, and this practice has continued to expand. Secular Muslim women, most village women, and also some very religious women, as well—instead of wearing borka, cover their heads with the *anchol* or decorative end of the *sari* when they go out. Secularist gentry respondents told me that they consider wearing borka a Pakistani, not a Bengali custom, but mores have indeed changed since the Liberation War.

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