



in memoriam

Woman of Substance

by Almas Zakiuddin

HER aunt remembers her with a wistful sadness, tempered hugely by pride. "She was the daughter we never had - such a beautiful, talented, intelligent and lively young woman," says Sarwar Khan, recalling the life and times of her niece, a woman of extraordinary substance.



Shireen Akbar MBE July 30, 1944 - March 8, 1997

Shireen Akbar, who died at the age of 52 a year ago tomorrow, was the kind of person whose loss is sharp, painful and sometimes inexplicable to many - even as her memory is a source of immense personal, professional, individual and collective pride.

No one who has ever known her can forget her; everyone who was touched by her in any way is proud of her.

For Bangladesh, she was the woman who made the seemingly ordinary, very special. And it is testimony to her multifaceted talent, if testimony were needed, that Shireen Akbar made people from all races, backgrounds, religions, and nations feel that although ordinary, they too, could be special.

When she died last year, Shireen had achieved remarkable professional success: awarded the MBE in the Queen's Honour List in June, 1996, she had been acknowledged in her adopted home, the United Kingdom, as the pioneer of an extraordinary experiment in education - both at the community and the individual levels.

A few months after she died of cancer, the Victoria and Albert Museum opened an exhibition dedicated to her memory. Entitled *Shamiana: The Mughal Tent*, it was an unique exhibition. Over forty groups and eight hundred individuals in nine countries across the globe had been directly involved in the project and it was the first time that their work, comprising fifty richly decorated textile panels, individually designed and hand-made, went on display.

Shamiana, however, was not just a display of textiles or even of embroidery. It was the last, but by no means the least, example of Shireen's triumphs in her life-long quest to educate and empower - as one writer has said, it was "the fusion of many different strands of her life." It spoke of her spirit, her talent, her compassion and her legacy to the world.

"You see, she did something quite unexpected," recalls a close friend in Dhaka. "Shireen breached the hitherto inaccessible and subtle barriers of the British museum world. These were places into which South Asians, especially women, would never dream of going. She not only took the women and children into the museum, she enabled their voices - and the voices of ordinary people everywhere - to be heard inside museums. That's what *Shamiana* symbolises!"

How Shireen created *Shamiana*, and enabled the voices of ordinary people to breach the barriers of class and race in the UK is the culmination of her story. Her work began many years before that event. Born Shireen Hasib, the daughter of the late Syed Abdul Hasib and Begum Selina Hasib, in Calcutta, she was brought up in Dhaka, where her family moved after the birth of Pakistan. Here,

she went to school and obtained a Masters degree in English at Dhaka University, winning a scholarship to study education at Cambridge University, in 1968.

"She was always ready to face a challenge," recalls her close friend in Dhaka, whose emotional bonds are so deep and painful still, that she requests anonymity. "It was something that one almost took for granted - she managed always to cope. Whether it was the racism she encountered at work, the trials and tribulations of her marriage or the trauma of battling cancer while living on her own in London, she was a fighter."

And yet, Shireen's way of meeting challenges was never strident but rather a quiet, positive, determined activism. Coupled with this came an instinct - a cousin and close friend in London says "for Shireen Apa it was like a way of life" - to give of herself, to strive always to do more.

In 1979, she started working as language tutor for South Asian girls at Bethnal Green Adult Institute in London and it was here that she realised that teaching English the conventional way was never going to be enough. In order to help the people she was working with, she had to understand what was going on in their lives.

"Shireen concluded that the racial abuse faced by South Asian women in the city, the limits on their independence placed by their own communities, the manner in which South Asian girls were coerced into marriage, or failed to be understood by their parents - all these issues had to be resolved. Education was a key, but education meant empowerment and understanding," explains her friend.

As a result, Shireen's role expanded, from interpreter to counselor, confidante, adviser, and she even became a regular chauffeur for South Asian families, collecting their children from school so that the parents would not worry about their safety.

"It was at this time she realized how isolated they were - the women, especially, from South Asia and Bangladesh," recalls Shireen's friend. "She began to take them places they had never known existed."

Shireen's involvement with children at this time led to the creation of "Our

Exhibition", a collection of art work by Bangladeshi children which went on display at the Commonwealth Institute in 1982. It was the first of several exhibitions that she was to conceive and execute in the years ahead. Although varied in theme, these exhibitions would not only highlight South Asian art and heritage, but also provide a forum for South Asians, for immigrant women, and Bangladeshis in the UK, to educate their children, empower and learn about themselves.

"Crafts of Bangladesh", organised by Shireen in 1986, travelled to Birmingham and Bradford and, together with "Our Exhibition" eventually became a permanent resource for schools and adult education centres in the east London - supported by funds which the indefatigable Shireen managed to raise for the purpose.

"She used to drive this huge van around east London," remarks her cousin and close friend, recalling with a

wry smile what must have been an incongruous sight: an incredibly feminine, saree-clad (she used to wear sarees everywhere, without exception) and petite South Asian woman, at the controls of the large vehicle, undoubtedly displaying grit, drive and boundless energy.



Shireen Akbar with her daughter (extreme left), her uncle and colleague, outside Buckingham Palace, after receiving her MBE.

created post at London's prestigious Victoria & Albert Museum, in 1991.

This was when she embarked on the most fulfilling and yet, as she told me once, the most challenging years of her life," remarks her close friend in Dhaka. It was during this time that her marriage ended, her career blossomed, she found out she had cancer.

"She learned to live on her own, discovered the joy of great fulfillment in her work but she also had to cope with extremely daunting personal challenges."

Putting her personal problems to one side, Shireen launched herself in her new job at the V&A with dedication and spirit, gradually developing the germ of an idea which was, eventually, to be her most outstanding achievement.

During her visit to women in the South Asian community in London, Shireen would tell them about the V&A in general and the newly opened Nehru Gallery, which housed a large collection

of South Asian art, in particular. The women had no idea what the inside of a museum looked like and even more interesting, perhaps, the museum in question - the V&A - had never thought of opening its doors and actively seeking the participation of members of the South Asian British community. So Shireen invited them in.

"It wasn't easy" recalls her friend. There were many obstacles to overcome. The women, themselves, had to be guided through virtually each step of the way, from how to negotiate their way through the London underground to the V&A, and what to expect when they got there.

As Shireen remarked in an interview published in the magazine *Femina* in December, 1996, "You wouldn't believe how isolated these women were. I even had to warn them that their bags would be checked, and explain why that was necessary. If I hadn't, they would have left at the door."

In the event, the women did not leave at the door. Indeed, they not only began to walk around and look at the exhibits in the Nehru Gallery, but gradually began to learn about their own heritage, about South Asia, and most significantly, about gender issues and their relevance to their own lives.

In Shireen's own words, quoted in the magazine interview, "I would stop before a beautifully embroidered piece of silk from Shah Jehan's time and ask them if they could guess who'd worked on it. They almost always said 'women' and were really surprised that it was actually men who had produced such delicate work. We could then tell them that, with payment, men would do what they disdainfully passed off as 'women's work'. They started comparing it to their own situations..."

The women were encouraged to visit the V&A, with their children if they so desired, and become familiar with the exhibits. They were aided by textile experts, artists and by Shireen's talks and slide shows. By the end of 1991, the germ of an idea had become a concrete proposal: inspired by the exhibits in the Nehru Gallery, the women began to work on a project in which they could create something on their own. The central focus of their interest was the Mughal Tent - a symbol not only of a home or a refuge, but also of dispossession, travel, migration and art. These elements combined to provide a strong and unique thematic form to what had started as an exploration in art and an attempt to bring isolated South Asian women closer to their own roots.

And that is how *Shamiana: The Mughal Tent* was born. The women formed themselves into groups and began to work on tent hangings and designs. As word spread - and to Shireen's surprise, the fairly small and local project blossomed into something quite big and overwhelming. It happened spontaneously - women from different parts of the UK, and abroad, began to ask if they, too, could design and create tent hangings. The project spread into Pakistan, India, South Africa, the UAE, USA, Burma, Ireland, Bangladesh and by 1997, there were more than eight hundred women directly involved in the project.

As the months and years passed, groups in the UK began to exhibit their

work, meet and exchange notes. Internationally, too, there was a great deal of interaction and mutually beneficial exchanges as women learned from and about each other - as individuals, and as people from different backgrounds.

A major aspect of Shireen's project was that it brought together diverse groups. Another significant aspect was that it provided the women with a reason to feel they could do something important, something creative. The sense of achievement and self-esteem which the women displayed thereafter was noticeable. Also important was the impact of the women's project on the system itself - on the somewhat conservative world of the British art institution.

"It wasn't easy to breach the barriers," comments Shireen's friend. "There was resentment, there had to be some kind of reaction to the manner in which the South Asian women had almost invaded what until then was a terribly British world. But there were many who realised how the experience was enriching the art world. Shireen had lots of admirers and many close friends."

The time came when she needed them all. Although her cancer had been treatable, and she had managed admirably to withstand the impact of the early treatment - travelling, and visiting Dhaka afterwards - it came back without warning in early 1997.

"She planned to attend her daughter's graduation," remembers her cousin, Samina, or Sam as she is fondly known, was graduating in May and Shireen wanted fairly desperately to be there when it happened.

"She was not doing well, but she refused to give in," recalls her close friend. "She was back in hospital, but was planning to leave the next day. We were all spending time with her - her mother, her daughter, friends, family."

That is when the end came. In the early hours of the morning of Friday March 8th, 1997, Shireen Akbar passed away. She had made plans for lunch the next day, had walked around the hospital ward in the early evening and had wondered why her daughter had suddenly appeared by her bedside late at night.

"It is not easy to talk about her - especially in the past tense," says her friend, softly. Members of her family, and other close friends echo that sentiment. And yet, painful though it is for many, Shireen Akbar's personality and legacy are also cause for joy and have been remembered in more ways than one.

In June 1997, the V&A formally opened the exhibition which Shireen had conceived and planned. *Shamiana: The Mughal Tent*, which was dedicated to her, became an enduring legacy to the memory of an extraordinary person.

Shireen Akbar's life was shorter than it ought to have been, ending when she had just begun to reach the peak of her creative talents. It is, therefore, even more remarkable that in that short span of time she managed to do so much, and to give of herself in such an unforgettable way. Shireen Akbar's life inspires us all to do more, to strive, to give of ourselves. To never ask for anything in return. That is the mark of this remarkable person, the ultimate tribute to this woman of substance.

profile

Tahar Ben Jelloun's Two Shores

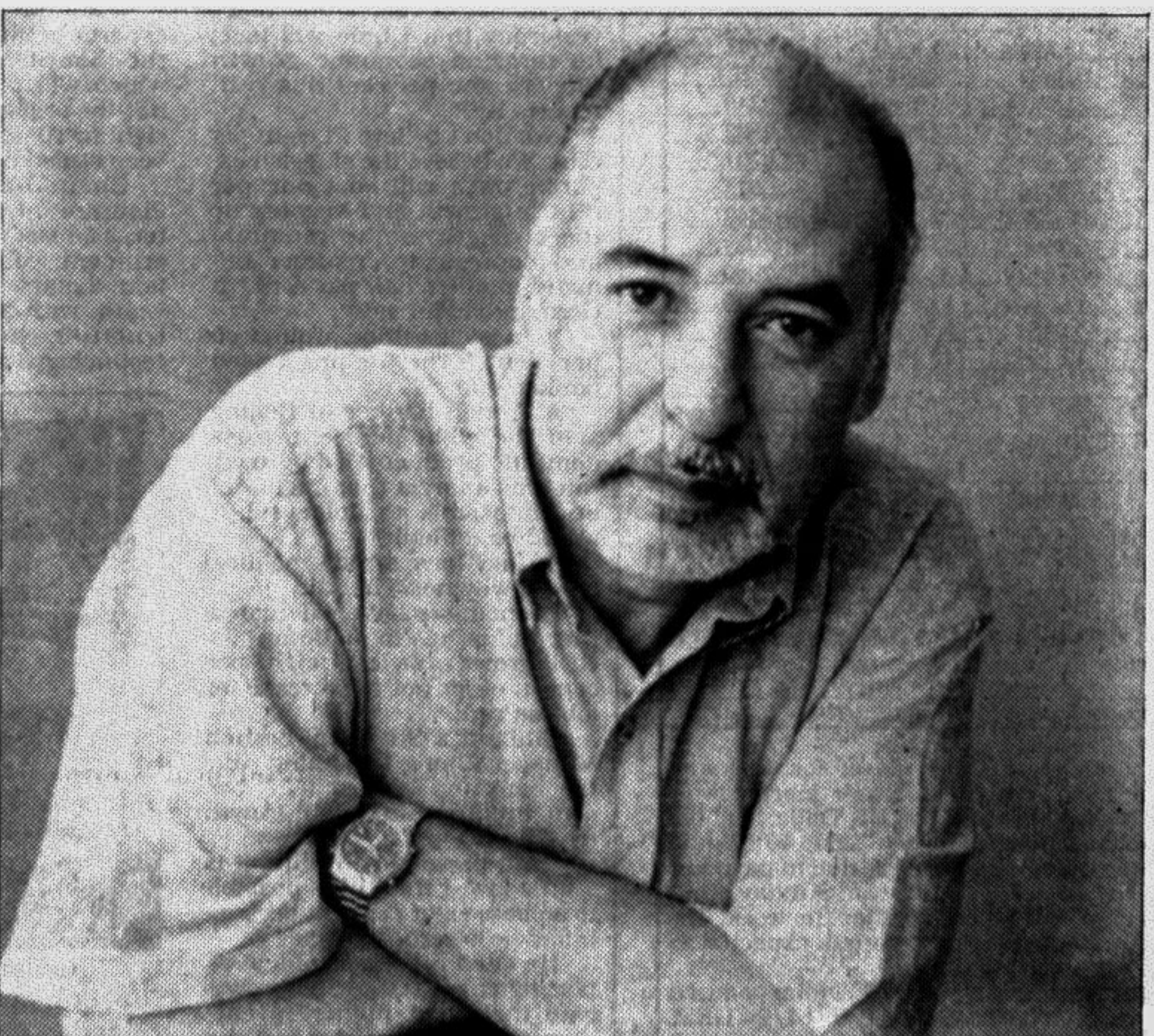
by Sylvie Bullo

Hundreds of writers from Argentina, Africa, Switzerland, America and other countries have made a name for themselves in France, but not a single one of them has forgotten the decisive moment when he discovered this country. They include the Moroccan writer Tahar Ben Jelloun who left Morocco, full of light, to come and study in a silent grey country, but, when he was about to return home, he hesitated and settled in Paris.

BETWEEN Fez, "that town where one suffocates with those stones darkened by lies and a taste for gain", and Tangiers, "incomprehensible to its inhabitants and dear to artists, a city which is nothing but degradation", Tahar Ben Jelloun returns to Morocco in his latest book, "La Nuit de l'Erreur", to bring the legend and myth of the seductive, cruel and destructive woman into play in it. The writer has made his native land into a kind of base on which he modulates his work, seeking out memories and places he has lived in, like a yearning. Tahar Ben Jelloun himself admits that "literature repairs the betrayal of memories". Ben Jelloun has been captivated and captured by French culture. He is acknowledged as an im-

portant writer, is feted in Paris and remains the most French of Moroccans. He lives on two shores of mingled memories. Morocco is his roots, his land, his "native poem" as he calls it, and his everyday anguish. On the other shore, there is Paris, a language, a place to write in and somewhere to live. "I observe. I scrutinize. I am curious about this everyday life made up of noise, of brief polemics, short-lived scandals and such similar words. I read the poets. I open French novels. I leaf through them and I read some of them. I do not feel very close to this literature but I am interested in it. I feel like getting to know it and discovering it. I often take part in discussions. I do not stay aloof."

He first came to Paris in July 1961, at the age of seventeen, and he found the town completely grey, from the sky to the buildings, not understanding why



the country seemed to be deprived of light. Then he was struck by the rigidity of the expression worn by people he came across in the streets, on his walks. "On the train taking me from Saint-Lazare to Marly-le-Roi, the town in which I was following a course in cinema appreciation, I can still remember the reigning silence and the closed faces of the passengers. Later, I noticed that, under the influence of fine weather, they were transformed. In the evening, they sang and danced in the streets. I can't help thinking that Paris is a city which is cursed by its climate! Yet it is one of the rare places in the world in which there is such artistic feverishness and where the architecture is so exceptional."

Ten years later, Tahar Ben Jelloun returned to France, this time to do a doctorate in psychology. This time, he had a completely different impression. "I was extremely happy to be here. To my great surprise, I discovered a whole variety of nationalities in the microcosm of students. I thought it was limited to the student residence, but, on coming out, I noticed that it was almost a widespread phenomenon and that in France the mix of cultures well and truly exists. I did not have the intention of remaining in Paris once I had fin-

ished my studies, but, curiously, each time I was to return to Morocco, I felt anguish and once there, I missed Paris. So, little by little and without having really decided upon it, I settled in France."

Twenty-five years later, Tahar Ben Jelloun is still here, having, in the mean time, become one of the most popular Maghrebian French-language writers. He has won over the intellectuals and other people by his stories, his poetry and his tales. He has a gift for story-telling. A handful of sand, a little wind, snatches of dreams and swallowed-back tears can all be a pretext for him to tell a beautiful story. Tahar Ben Jelloun is a descendant of the troubadours of the sands and the bards of the desert. He takes his readers on a journey in time, space and imagination. The boundary is sometimes unclear between the dream-world and life. The author of "La Nuit Sacrée" (which was awarded the Goncourt prize in 1987), enjoys leading the reader astray and playing on all aspects of reality. With his erotic boldness, his feminism and his mysticism, "La Nuit de l'Erreur" is inhabited by poetry, Ben Jelloun's first love. He has remained faithful to it.