

# Plays of Ratan Thiyam and H. Kanhailal: Some Critical Insights

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The plays of H. Kanhailal and Ratan Thiyam not only exhibit rich folk traditions but they also take the apparently discrete linguistic practices of small narratives to connect reflexively to the discourses of humanity.

As Louis Gates has shown, a playwright/speaker is a “cultural impersonator”— therefore, representational authenticity of any signifying practice is much more complicated than the singular, transparent, static categories assumed to give the writer a particular view. To make a semiotic analysis of these performance pieces we need to describe the various processes of signification and communication on the stage via stage props and other concrete elements; the theatre “scenography,” costumes, soundscapes, “stage design”, “scenic design” and “theatre-design”. Thus we talk about a three-dimensional construction of a visual, aural, material and spatial *mise en scene*, using a synthesis of different technologies, from the intangibles of lighting and sound to the actuality of wood and cloth.

A brief sketch of Manipur’s history acquaints us with the fact that there was indigenous culture of Manipur prior to the Vaishnavite movement of the eighteenth century, which was strongly propagated by ruling monarchs like Garib Niwaz (1709-1748) and Bhagyachandra (1763-1798). The traditional *lai* (gods) were destroyed; ancient scripts, the Meithei scripts were burnt and replaced by Bengali scripts; the Hindu calendar

and system of *gotras* were introduced; and the Hindu dietary laws were enforced. But even after that, the pre-Vedic Meithei deity Sanamahea continues to be worshipped in every household in ancestor-worshipping festivals like the *Lai Haraoba*. The main point is that the ethos of Meithei culture has been systematically subsumed within the value of an increasingly powerful Hindu hegemony. Historically, the people of Ningthonja class were called Meithei and they later on subdued the other six classes of the state around AD 33 to form a community. In the late sixties and early seventies of the twentieth century, pre-Hindu Meithei religious groups emerged to counter the dominance of the Hindu-Meithei Vaishnavites. There was a movement of resuscitating the past by re-affirming the worship of Sanamahea in opposition to the Radha-Krishna culture in Manipur. Moreover, there was a resistance to the imposition of Bengali scripts through a move to revive the Meithei scripts which involved a conscious rejection of Hindu values and artifacts, even the wearing of *tilak* and the act of performing *Ras leela* were shunned. Alongwith this overtly revolutionary activity there was cultural counterpoint provided by the Pan Manipur Youth League (PANMYL), founded on ethnic identity, Meithei-tribal ethnic oneness, whose political goal was the establishment of an “autonomous political state” and the liberation of the Manipuris from “Indian

occupation.” If read against the historical perspective of Manipur, the plays of Ratan Thiyam and Kanhailal are purely based on the physical culture of Manipur itself; thus, the appropriation of *Thabal Changba* dance (a dance throughout the night during the Holi celebrations linking the hands to form a large circle, building a communal energy and rhythm with strong, vigorous jumps), the martial art tradition *Thang-ta*; the narratives of *Phungawari* (fireside stories) etc finally produces a flexible dramatic idiom to adapt to the changing contemporary situations of the state.

In April 1976, under the able guidance of Ratan Thiyam, the Chorus Repertory Theatre was established in the valley of the small hill state, Manipur, encircled by nine folds of hills in the easternmost part of India. This Repertory, located in the outskirts of Imphal, marked its anniversary season of twenty five years of existence through the auspicious act of inaugurating an architectural marvel called “The Shrine”—a 200-seated auditorium conceived and designed by Ratan Thiyam endowed with a separate space for set-construction and storage. Regarding Thiyam’s oeuvre, his 1984 production *Chakravayuha* (The Wheel of war) is performed more than hundred times around the globe, and this significant single play has catapulted the company to global spotlight in the late nineties. Plays like *Uttar-Priyadarshi* (*The Final Beatitude*, 1996), *Hey Nungshibi Prithivi* (*My Earth, My Love*, 2003) and *Chinglon Mapan Tampak Ama* (*Nine Hills One Valley*, 2005) are equally acclaimed as masterpieces. Equipped with most outstanding performances in many international festivals in India and abroad, this Repertory has been able to earn the prestigious Fringe First Award, 1987 in Edinburgh International Theater Festival, Indo-Greek

Friendship Award, 1984 in Greece, Diploma of Cervantino International Theater Festival, 1990 in Mexico and so on. Thiyam himself has won numerous awards and acclamations for his artistic achievements, such as, Padmashree (1989), Sangeet Natak Akademi Award (1987), John D. Rockefeller 3<sup>rd</sup> Award (2007) (endowed by Asian Cultural Council, New York) and so on.

Ratan Thiyam’s plays pose signification as a demystification of truth. In Thiyam’s case, the audience-spectator dynamics opens up a new space of testimony. He debunks the authoritative voice of verification, proof or demonstration. He topples the kinds of knowledge that we label as knowledges of demarcation and certitude. He employs signs on the stage as a sensibility to shake the assured distinctions of any ontology of the “real”; of presence and absence; and of life and death.

Technically, the concept of space—the ideologically loaded meanings produced by shape, décor, location, history, architecture and so on— is intrinsically connected to the politics of signification. Augusto Boal’s protest theatre, Peter Brook’s “empty space,” Bertold Brecht’s dismantling of masking, Robert Lepage’s site-specific performances, and David Wiles’ idea of the “container” or supposedly “abstract” dedicated theatre spaces— enable us to highlight the importance of sightlines, acoustics, proximity, scale, furnishings, performance amenities etc. Similarly, Thiyam’s use of space gives birth to complicated networks of “models” or “maps”. Space here is a site of turbulence that encompasses scales of dimensions. It unleashes an array of contradictory messages. It composes relationships outside certain defined concepts and produces a grammar of signs beyond “fetishes, consciousness, essence, being, matter” (Serres: 137). This space draws on the vitality of deviations that elude taxonomies. Each space

alludes to a narrative, method, story or data in unconventional ways. We may take for example, the (visual) text of *Ashibagee Eshei* (2009) - performed by the Chorus Repertory Theatre in the Kalakshetra Museum, Guwahati, at 5.30 pm on 25<sup>th</sup> February, 2009. The performance text is designed and directed by Ratan Thiyam and the duration is of seventy minutes. Another example is: *Nine Hills, One Valley* (2005), which was staged in the annual international theatre festival organized by the National School of Drama (NSD), New Delhi (Jan-2-14), 2006. Thiyam's concept of space gives birth to a malleable responsibility to create, to invent, to produce some fluctuating tendencies. For example, in *Nine Hills, One Valley*, the woven reed mats that represent the nine hills surrounding Imphal (also the stage lighting) create a strong sense of geography; but at the same time, the mats signify the stubborn materiality of the Meitheis and a thrust of cultural narcissism. The mats also herald a will to risk loss or project a constraint of our interpretive "will to know." The fluctuation of colours produces a self-wounding laboratory for discovering, as Sarah Kofman puts it, a "storm of difficulties". In this context, as audience, we are forced to be wily in finding a path that does not exist. Also there is a threat to the romantic aspiration of giving voice to the voiceless in the invasive stretch of surveillance. Semantically, a steady rain of rolled-up newspapers flung on stage (*Nine Hills, One Valley*) herald the rhetorical positions of fragmented world-views. It is a litany of disaster and shows how there can be numerous approaches harboured by media to deal with fractured Manipuri lives dictated by violence and insurgency. The presence of the *Maichous*, the Seven Wise Men on the stage-space converges on the fluidity of the thought-processes of the worried mothers;

the elegant robes of the men and the brown poles signify the shattered dreams of the wailing sons of Manipur, a land stinking with degradation—the semi-dark lighting and fluctuating brightness intensify the dark emotions. Again, the while-clad dolls on the lap of the mothers conclude with the anxieties of death.

The Manipuri rendition: *Ashibagee Eshei* is based on Henrik Ibsen's last play *When We Dead Awaken* and it revolves round the non-reality of characters embedded in a symbolic and metaphysical dimension. The performance is designed to express the internal entanglement of four characters — Maja, Arnold Rubek, Irene and Ulfhejm (In Manipuri adaption Rubek becomes "Shaktam Lapka" or Sculptor; Irene becomes "Shaktam" on Image; Maja becomes "Shakhenbi" or Beautiful Woman and Ulfhejm becomes "Lamlanba" or Stranger). Story apart, the way these characters fit into the Manipuri adaptation poses a great challenge since culture, tradition and style of the Norwegians or the Europeans that form the background of the play are so different from that of the Manipuris. The semiotic model assumes the autonomy of different life worlds which are based on conversations amongst co-subjects and this pursuit of constituted meaning unfolds certain set-ups of formative and transformative human action and historically shifting values.

For Thiyam, very integral to the act of theatre signification is the representation of the performer's body on the stage. In the theatre space of *Ashibagee Eshei*, the long-lost dream woman of Shaktam- Lapka's past is stratified with the ethos of the bygone days and in a way, it pines for an identification with the non-Western 'other'. Her body is 'multi-sited'—her body articulates the power of expression that informs representation and invokes the problem of circumscribing a hybrid re-constructed

identity. Thiyam used innovative theatre techniques to represent Shaktam as the fallen woman as she is the other woman of a married man's fantasy. Hence, by roping in the words of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu we can say that her body in a space is well-equipped to inhabit and demonstrate its status, class position and 'cultivated disposition' through the range of activities that it exhibits in interacting with the world around it. As Bourdieu puts it, the "sense of honour" is inscribed in the "body schema" and in the patterns of thought and this in turn, "enables each agent to engender all the practices consistent with the logic of challenge and riposte" (1998: 15). Thus, within a configured theatre space, Shaktam's body not only represents the increasing diversity and changing cultural landscape of a Manipuri society but it also provokes a sense of "bodily insecurity" as manifested by her baggy, "amorphous" and Oriental outfits. Certain points of resistance totally reshape her body in new dynamics because at every moment the experiential self is lived differently culturally and historically. Through Shaktam's body (her pale white-painted face and flowing white hair), the protagonist Shaktam-Lapka, who was living at the margins of the "familiar", is transported to a distant or "exotic" space which gives her a possibility to flout rules, dictates, protocols and to counter certain disciplinary practices as elaborated by Foucault (1979). The body hence becomes a locus of embodied, but transformable experiences depending on contexts and conditions. This is in contrast to the inanimate but life-like puppets made by Shakhnbi, Shaktam-Lapka's wife. Shaktam is not successful in her urge to go back to the past or to step out of the culture entirely, nor is she able to find the resources to save her from the destructive tendencies of the society. Moreover,

there is a gigantic tomb of Shaktam-Lapka's dream-woman (*Ashibagee Eshei*). It can be said that in *Ashibagee Eshei*, the tomb is re-situated and re-made across cultures and contexts—here, the Ibsenian play (*When We Dead Awaken*) is told from an indigenous perspective.

The establishment of Heisnam Kanhailal's theatre group: Kalakshetra Manipur dates back to 1969. The Kalakshetra Manipur is not just a production company, it is also seriously engaged to the research theatre. For thirty five years, the group has been working to create a theatre-idiom based on physical rather than psychological language, driven by instinct and intuition, and exploring the specific powers of theatre in the context of native culture. With his wife and leading actress, Sabitri Debi, Kanhailal creates theories of theatre and life. Both performers are highly acclaimed in India and their creative partnership produced a number of plays including: *Tamnalai* (*Haunting Spirits*, 1972), *Kabui Keioiba* (*Half Man Half Tiger*, 1975), *Imphal '73* (1974), *Memoirs of Africa* (1975), *Pebet* (1975), *Rashomon* (1987), *Migi Sarang* (1991), *Karna* (1997), *Draupadi* (2000), *Nupi* (2002), *Dakghar* (2006). Kanhailal's projects include the "Nature-Lore"—a move away from the conditioning of the city towards a "home – return", exploring the rural landscape with an open heart. This is a way of his engagement with art to overcome the racial biases and attitudes that exist in Manipur.

The verbatim and documentary style performances exhibit the potential of cultural reification. However, quite interestingly, this process evokes an ethnodrama, a conversely loaded phenomenon in which a text/ multiple texts are created by readers/informants/actors/critics—this ethnographic semiotics renders the performance in a continual process of validation

and cuts across culturally specific signs, symbols, aesthetics, behaviours, and languages. The same is true for Heisnam Kanhailal's *Pebet* (1975) and *Draupadi* (2000), so much so that these plays transgressively blur boundaries of practices, methods, and techniques to advocate a "public voice" that has been emancipatory and educational. Inspired by Denzin's work on Triangle Theatre Company (Coventry, U.K), the idea of auto-ethnography can be converged with Kanhailal's critical reflections in performance-pieces like *Pebet* and *Draupadi*. Here he explores the personal responses (the loss of a child in *Pebet*, the marginalization of Manipuris in other nation-states etc.) through ethnographic narratives in production. At times, scripts are made available to audiences prior to or at performances so that a Bakhtinian polyphonic interaction takes place as the spectators can participate and get engaged; can seek clarification or can revisit the issues represented in the performance.

The "public voice" of ethnodrama is intricately related to Bernstein's theories of giving the power of authorship back to those who are being taught and described; being put under surveillance; being regarded as "audience." Significantly, Kanhailal's performances and their inherent elements of ethnodrama return the ownership, and therefore, the act of representation to its informants/audience (the theatre academy or company backs out here) (Mienckakowski: 1996). The audience is given a chance to access a clearer public explanation and produce a cultural critique.

For Kanhailal, representation of the body on stage is an important act. In his thought-provoking essay: "In Ritual Theatre (Theatre of Transition)" (2004), Kanhailal says that the body being a site of multiple signs enchants him

as it can be regarded as a repository of "the biological evolution of organism-in-life." It is a crystallization of subsequent oppression and resistance and a locus of transition— "an intra-cultural exercise." The body can also be a significant element in the "Ritual of Suffering" as it "is imprisoned by the forces of increasing urban sophistication and the "speed" of the time." In the context of performance, the body is charged with the complexity of energy, biological, social, and creative. However, Kanhailal is an ardent follower of Eugenio Barba's "Body-in-life—the polyphony of tensions" in decoding the performer's physicality on the stage. Barba's act of roping in diverse aspects like Balinese dance, Indian Theatre (Kathakali), some techniques from Grotowski and Brecht helped him in challenging the compartmentalization of the actor in Western culture; and these multifarious engagements eventually gave birth to his International School of Theatre Anthropology in 1979 (in 1964 he began the Odin Teatret in Oslo). His key writings like *Beyond the Floating Islands* (1986), *The Paper Canoe— A Guide to Theatre Anthropology* (1994) and *The Secret Art of the Performer: A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology* (1991) evolved from texts to improvisations, attempting to create what Artaud sought: a theatre of physical gestures devoid of words. To a considerable extent, Barba's ideologies influenced Kanhailal's performances— Kanhailal appropriated Barba's concept of "pre-expressive behavior"; the amplification and dilation of the body, energetically and spatially; creation of an energized and "extended" performer; the use of extra-daily rather than daily techniques, pushing and enlarging the body's capabilities and balance beyond usage familiar to social situations; opposition as a guiding principle of movement,

as in a counterbalance or in moving downwards to prepare for a jump upwards; and ‘inconsistent consistency’, the internal logic of coded extra-daily modes of performances like Kabuki, mime, and Ballet. Barba’s absent presence can be traced in the performance-pieces like *Draupadi* and *Pebet* alike. Moreover, in “Ritual Theatre (Theatre of Transition)” (2004), he has himself acknowledged that he “swallowed up the text and absorbed it into our (performers) body instead of speaking out the lines through lip movement, facial and finger gestures” (2004: 550). He aims to shatter the whole network of illusion on the stage—as no one wants to be burdened with heavy light, set, costume and make-up. Kanhailal cleaned the stage where he begins to unfold the autonomy of theatre — the drama of biological evaluation accomplished by the bare body of the performer. The most controversial aspect of his play, Sabitri Debi’s nude scene in *Draupadi* which is cheaply labeled as a ploy to advocate sensationalism, is an act of exhibiting a necessarily “alert”, sensorial, and “informed” body that is extremely localized in a continuum of oppressive feelings. The nude body performs a community ritual here as the spectators are led into “the mythical world which infused into our body the unknown world of cosmic energy, and inspired us to enter the world of the collective unconscious” (2004:551). Again, in *Draupadi*, the naked female body on the stage (Sabitri Debi’s intense physical moves) aims to represent the reduction of women to mere commodities, especially the plight of the Manipuri women who become rape-victims in the hands of the Army. Moreover, the body’s strange language on the stage captures the transformational possibilities meant for the audience by entering the therapeutic realm. It modifies the purposes of entertainment as

aesthetic appeasement and provides a common interpretive framework to a group of audience (the Manipuris). It henceforth formulates some common parameters for a cohesively unified group in terms of relationships and interests. Like ethnographers, we can use his theatre language as a tool to elicit data. Also, the socio-linguistic behavior on the stage helps us to procure a slice of social relations, norms, roles, values, and mores. For Kanhailal, ethnography and performance share a common interest as both generate a space with a confluence of differences.

The plays by H. Kanhailal and Ratan Thiyam disclose a mode of enquiry and they are the self-conscious critique of hegemony. They especially talk about the sense of exploitation of indigenous people, and find means to subvert foundations, universal criteria of truth, or knowledge generated through the medium of grand or metatheory, and the supremacy of historical processes. These plays indeed produce polyvalent sites that are evocative of multiple impressions and questions in the mind of the audiences. A few questions or speculations generally found to be raised in the mind of them, however, are about the critical realities of oppression and resistance in a predominantly non-verbal dramaturgy of rhythm, gestures, and moments, the varied articulations of a performer’s body vis-à-vis the dominant strategies of time and space, how may the West appreciate the cultural expressions that are the characteristics of Asian identity, the possibility of the body having been biologically trained to cope with the ecosystem and natural environment through various performance techniques— vocabulary, dance, martial art, yoga, mantra and understanding of myth.



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