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## Theatre, Politics and Heishnam Kanhailal's *Pebet*: A Study

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### Abstract:

Theatre plays an important role in shaping ideas/beliefs or challenging ideas/beliefs. It has always been used as a media to express and communicate protest against injustice or oppression by those in power, as well as for creating consciousness in the audience and helping them to develop their skills in critical thinking and analysis. This paper will focus on the politics of theatre and study theatre as a space for resistance. It will also address how Heishnam Kanhailal through his play *Pebet* asserts his ethnic identity and tries to show resistance towards any forms of dominance.

### Keywords: Theatre, audience, resistance, identity.

Art imitates life and through art one has the freedom to interpret life. Theatre is the one art form which provides the best platform to interpret life, challenge ideas/beliefs and also seek to change the audiences' beliefs. As Thomas Postlewait says, "the theatrical arts have always been an important arena for representing the full imaginative realms of possibility (and even impossibility), as we fill the stage or the film with gods, demons, aliens, creatures, and a wild range of human beings" (Postlewait: 12). Also according to Mahesh Dattani, through the language of theatre man has been able to see himself for who he is, what he has made of himself and what he aspires to be (Dattani: 470). Theatre thus gives the dramatists/theatre practitioners the space to construct/reconstruct and to present/represent narratives. However this construction/reconstruction or presentation/representation of narratives varies from dramatist to dramatist and the target audience for whom the whole process of interpretation takes place also varies. If we look at Manipuri Theatre's past and the present, we can say that Manipuri culture, history, community narratives are present in most of the earlier as well as the modern plays even though the level of interpretation that takes place on the stage is different from one play to the other. This process of interpretation is necessary for a culture or a place which has always been subjected to marginalization or whose relation with the Indian mainstream has always been problematic.

Works like Heishnam Kanhailal's *Pebet* (1975), *Draupadi* (2000), Ratan Thiyam's *Chakravyuha* (1984), *Nine Hills One Valley* (2005) and Arambam Samarendra's *Judge Saheb's Family* (1973) raised serious concerns about the cultural issues, power manipulation, violence and the disintegration of the family due to changes in values and practices in the Manipuri society. In *Chakravyuha*, Thiyam reproduced an episode of Mahabharata to critique war, violence and the politics surrounding it. Through the story of Abhimanyu, Thiyam questions the notion of false heroism which drives the younger generation to sacrifice their lives and ultimately become a victim. Here the dramatists act as 'agents' who introduces political topics and even controversies in their works and then let the people judge about the socio-political conditions of the society. For instance Kanhailal's *Pebet* uses a popular folktale of Manipur to raise issues about cultural indoctrination which draws us to question the Meitei identity and also to judge our cultural position in the society.

Theatre as Heisnam Kanhailal says should be educative and it should be an educative experience (Kanhailal: 49). By 'educative' Kanhailal meant that theatre should create a new consciousness, some kind of a deeper experience of life (49). Experiences of life, which means the reality of the society, should be brought into theatre in a way that the audiences' reception of the performance helps them to face the reality. Therefore in the 80's and 90's when Manipur was in turmoil due to socio-political unrest he chose 'suffering' to be the main theme of his new theatre. Works like *Memoirs of Africa* (1985) and *Draupadi* (2000) reflects the sufferings of man caused by suppression. Through his portrayal of sufferings he wished to educate the people about the stark reality of the society and help them counter suffering, which he believes is at the core of everything. This contextualizing of the experiences of the society into theatre is always directed for a target audience chosen by the dramatist himself.

Augusto Boal (1931-2009) rightly observed that all theatre is political because all activities of men are political and theatre being one of them (Boal: 23). Also Boal was of the opinion that theatre and politics are inter-related and inseparable. He systematized his political philosophy into an aesthetic language, a language he called theatre of the oppressed. He voiced for resistance against the economic and social oppression in his society through his theatre. In some of his performances he allowed the audience to be part of the play, giving them a real life like experience through his theatre. In this way theatre becomes one of the media at our disposal to make people aware of the political, social and environmental issues. It promotes a richer kind of communication, which engages both our intellect and emotions and embody our ideals instead of merely relaying them as information. Also it becomes meaningful when different kinds of issues are addressed and offers a platform for open discussion. Thus political performances are meant to educate the people; convince them to take up action against any kind of authoritarianism and stand up for what is right. In this context, we can say that political performances are directed to change the minds of man. Also many theatre groups in India have played a crucial role in transforming the political and social fabric of the society. It is therefore important that the dramatist bring in all sorts of protest- social, economic or cultural into theatre and create a space for the audience to participate in the protest.

### **Kanhailal's *Pebet***

*Pebet* (1975) is based on a very popular folktale of Manipur. *Pebet* is the name of a small bird which the Manipuris believe that once existed. The tale is about a *Pebet* family wherein the *Pebet* mother uses her wit to save her children from the clutches of the greedy cat who even tries to eat the *Pebet* children. However in the play the tradition of the tale is broken and Kanhailal develops a dream like sequence in which he shows how the cat oppresses and tortures the *Pebet* children. There is no mention of any kind of torture in the folktale. It is a story for children narrated by the elders especially the grandmothers to their grandchildren to show how the clever *Pebet* mother and the youngest *Pebet* outwit the greedy cat. Kanhailal uses this familiar folktale of the people to parody some of the cultural and social issues of the Meitei people. It is to be noted that the Meiteis had their own indigenous form of cultural practices before the arrival of Hinduism in the early eighteenth century. Some section of the people still belief that Hinduism was forced upon the people to assert cultural superiority and to dominate the people. Therefore they stand for revival of the indigenous Meitei practices as oppose to those brought in by Hinduism.

In the play, the Cat that is represented as a Vaishnava captures the youngest *Pebet* and in the dream like sequence he tries to teach the youngest *Pebet* his ways and language. At

first the youngest Pebet resist but after a while he gives in to the ways and language of the Cat. The youngest Pebet is delighted with his new learning and follows the cat's order to lure his siblings and capture them. When all the Pebet children are captured the Cat uses his tactics to turn the Pebet children against each other. The Cat also turns the Pebet children against their mother and instructs them to stone the mother. When one of the Pebet brother bites the Cat's backside instead of licking it, torture is inflicted upon him by his own brother. The dream like sequence ends and Mother Pebet tricks the cat and finally the youngest Pebet is united with his family.

As mentioned above Kanhailal develops the dream like sequence in the play to protest against oppression and suppression which is associated with any kinds of cultural colonization. Rustom Bharucha calls it the 'fantasy of oppression' and says that "it is in this section that the politics of the play is most keenly felt before the happy end of the production which merely echoes the original end of the story with no irony whatsoever" ( Bharucha: 34). Here the Cat not only tries to indoctrinate the Pebet children but follows the strategy of divide and rule and turns the Pebet children against one another. Also the Cat is able to turn the Pebet children against their own Mother and orders the big brother to stone mother Pebet. The big brother not only stones his mother but orders his siblings to join him in action. The Pebets pick up stones and they chant:

JANANI JANMABHUMICHHA

CHHARGADAPI GARIYACHHI<sup>i</sup> ( Bharucha: 56)

This act of chanting the Sanskrit slokas taught by the Cat shows the submission of the Pebets to the Cat culture and their new found patriotic zeal leads them to stone their own mother. This is the ultimate triumph of the Cat that has not only succeeded in turning the children against one another but also against their own mother. Mother Pebet symbolizes Manipur and here one is reminded of history where the Manipuri King Pamheiba (1690-1751)<sup>ii</sup> under the influence of the new religion gave orders to burn the age old manuscripts (Puya) of Manipur. The King even exiled all the Meitei scholars who stood against the new religion. The incident which is known as the 'Puya mei thaaba' (the burning of Puya) is deeply embedded in the minds of the Meitei people and till this day, the particular day i.e the 17<sup>th</sup> day of Mera (Manipuri month) is observed as the Puya mei thaaba numit (the day the Puyas were burnt down). This reveals that the people are still resisting to Hinduism in their own way. But there is no denying the fact that majority of the Meitei people have accepted the Hindu faith and so today we find the worship of both Sanamahi and Hindu Gods in most of the Meitei household.

In the introduction of the book *Twist in the folktale* Ananda Lal argues that Kanhailal possibly intends a heroic conclusion (that is the defeat of the cat and reunion of the youngest Pebet with the family) to serve as a mockery of real life, in which the cat still dominates the Pebets politically and culturally (see Lal Ananda). Kanhailal's intention was to construct a narrative to comment on the cultural and political situation of Manipur and also to let the audience judge about their own position in the society. The shifting of Meitei rituals towards Hinduised rituals and the growing tensions between the Indian mainstream and the State were some of the concerns of the period. Also the growing consciousness of ethnic identity which struck the younger generation of the 60'S and 70's led to the formation of many associations to revive the old Meitei faith. Kanhailal's answer to this growing consciousness was *Pebet* which was considered as 'anti-Hindu' and 'anti- India' when it was first staged.

Rustom Bharucha points out that the aura of resistance in *Pebet* was much stronger in its earlier productions. The first production was staged in February 1975, the second was staged in 1976 and the third production was staged in 1980 at the Studio Theatre of the National School of Drama. He writes:

.....one should point out that the editing process of the production had already become visible in the second performance at the Manipur Dramatic Union in 1976. There were still two cats but no scaffold or drummers. However, the Old Man of the Village continued to make an appearance when the spirit was invoked by the mother. Today, the Old Man has disappeared from the production.....

He also argues that in Kanhailal's recent work there is diffusion of ethnicity which has increased due to the physicalization of the acting idiom. This diffusion can perhaps be attributed to the changing ideology and strategy of the dramatist which has its direct effect on theatre. Also Kanhailal observes that his methodology has changed. He says, "Now I give ideas, I never fix anything, never design anything-now the actors design and execute in their own language" (Kanhailal: 48). Further he observes that "theatre should not be rigid" and that "it should be flexible". Manipuri theatre critic E. Nilakanta Singh feels that Kanhailal has slowly evolved and changed gradually. After many performances *Pebet* has evolved into a new form but the aura of resistance can still be felt. Even though there have been some manipulations one cannot deny the fact that Mother *Pebet*'s protest through her cries resonates with resistance and it signifies resistance against any form of dominance culturally or politically. Here lies the politics of theatre when one is allowed to manipulate his work according to the need of his time.

Thus Kanhailal's *Pebet* can be considered as a play which explores vividly the idea of resistance through theatre. Like many of his plays, *Pebet* resists to oppression in any form and denounces passive acceptance of dominance culturally or politically. Through this play Kanhailal protested against the mechanism involved in cultural indoctrination which happens at the cause of uprooting the other culture which is considered inferior. In a way Kanhailal questions the Meitei identity which is bound with culture and also draws the audience to question their own cultural position. Thus the politics of the dramatist is to represent the socio-political conditions of his society and let the audience judge this representation.

#### Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> Sanskrit sloka meaning Mother and Motherland are greater than heaven.

<sup>ii</sup> King Pamheiba was rechristened into Garib Niwaz by Shantidas Goswami, a hindu preacher from Sylhet.

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