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Performing the Folktale: Contemporising the Traditional Narrative

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Abstract:

Modern Indian dramatists have realised the potential of folk and oral traditions to imbibe and carry contemporary ideas. Many among them have created plays that contemporise the folk theatrical space in an aesthetically as well as ideologically compelling manner. In this light, this paper discusses Chandrasekhar Kambar's *Jokumaraswami*, Habib Tanvir's *Charandas Chor* and Heisnam Kanhailal's *Pebet*. These three plays decontextualise their source folk narratives and situate them in the performance space while enlarging their symbolic parameters and enriching the original narratives with newer meanings. The paper throws light on the blend that emerges through the interaction between the contemporary critical sensibilities of the dramatists and the symbolic potentialities of folk narratives. It investigates the significance and validity of Indian folk traditions in the communication of contemporarily relevant ideas within the context of modern Indian theatre, illustrating with the help of the selected plays.

Keywords: folk narratives, contemporary theatre, traditional forms, performance.

There was a surge of incorporation of folk performative elements in post-independence urban theatre in India. Much of this was institutionalised and incentivised as part of the 'theatre of roots' movement. Stalwarts like Habib Tanvir, Chandrasekhar Kambar and Heisnam Kanhailal amongst others, however, sought independently to create a theatrical paradigm that addressed the concerns of the contemporary audience while using elements of indigenous performance forms. Their approach was not a revivalist one. Rather, they believed that what they wanted to communicate was perfectly possible with the traditional resources they inherited. They realised, as Kapila Vatsyayan articulates, "The principles of eternity and of flux, of an ever-old and ever-new or renewing phenomenon, were integrated into.... the pattern of Indian performing arts" (9). This is capitalised on by these dramatists to develop a theatre clothed in traditionality and breathing contemporaneity.

This paper discusses three plays that reflect this blend: Chandrasekhar Kambar's *Jokumaraswami*, Habib Tanvir's *Charandas Chor* and Heisnam Kanhailal's *Pebet*. All three plays make interventions in folktales to transform the traditional narrative and turn it into a contemporary experimental play. *Jokumaraswami* "creatively reworks the folk myth of a phallic god of fertility into a powerfully contemporary anti-feudal message" (*Twist in the Folktale*). Adapting a Rajasthani folktale preserved in writing by Vijaydan Detha, *Charandas Chor* delves into the workings of a simple and 'honest thief', and the mechanics of power structures. Modifying a *phunga wari* narrative – fireside story narrated by Manipuri grandmothers to children – *Pebet* subverts the familiar to ignite consciousness towards the Manipuri struggle for identity (Bharucha "Pebet" 152). The present discussion aims to study the plays parallelly, and present the manner in which they use their source folk material and remould it to relate to contemporary needs.

All three plays originate from different regional traditions of theatre. Therefore, the folk context of the dramatic form of the plays differs. *Jokumaraswami* dramatizes the folk ritual of *Jokumara Hunnive*, still prevalent in rural north Karnataka. In his note on *Jokumaraswami*, Kambar explains that the ritual is based in the folk myth of *Jokumaraswami*, a fertility god, who is Shiva's son and takes birth on earth. Within six days of his birth, he seduces all women of the village. On the seventh day, angry cuckolds of the village kill him, and the earth is said to turn green wherever his blood falls. As a fertility god, *Jokumaraswami* is associated with rain and it is believed that even a rainless month will end with a shower on *Jokumara Hunnive*. As part of the folk ritual, barren women cook snake-gourd as an embodiment of *Jokumaraswami* and feed it to their husbands, in hope of bearing children (3).

Fertility rites exist in all cultures. They are perhaps as old as civilisation itself. James Frazer in his ground-breaking work, *The Golden Bough*, and Jessie Weston in *From Ritual to Romance*, study respectively, "ancient nature cults that associated the physical condition of the king with the productivity of the land" and the saga of the Holy Grail as "a literary outgrowth of ancient ritual". The same is drawn upon by T.S. Eliot in "The Waste Land". The Fisher King legend is used to indicate the barrenness of contemporary British society – the metaphorical waste land of the poem – devoid of faith and love. This idea of the metaphorical waste land is also expressed in Kambar's play, where Gowda, the feudal landlord, with his hurt pride announces, "...I haven't left any land in this village untouched" ("*Jokumaraswami*" 20). Ananda Lal observes in his introduction, "land equals woman and woman equals land" (ix), and thus Gowda speaks metaphorically of his proprietorial hold over the women of the village.

Gowda's wife, Gowdathi, is childless and neglected by her husband who is occupied by his feudal concerns. A contrast to Gowda, Basanna – the fertility god re-incarnate – in a turn of events, impregnates Gowdathi and meets his sacrificial death. Gowdathi receives the love she deserves from Basanna. The fault in the gender relationship that Gowda perpetuated, is amended by Basanna's act of surrender. This is "the awful daring of a moment's surrender" that Eliot talks about in "The Waste Land". Just as the act of rape as an act of aggression results in the curse in the Fisher King legend, the kind of aggressive, transactional relationship maintained by Gowda renders his wife barren, and by extension the land of his village infertile. This communicates that whenever man's lust or greed disturbs the harmony of the gender relationship, or the natural order, a wasteland scenario shall occur (Dutta-Roy 16). What Gowdathi seeks is her husband's love and surrender. What the land seeks is also the tiller's love and surrender which manifests in his/her sweat and labour. Thus, using the motif of a fertility rite, Kambar at once attacks the idea of the alpha male as well as critiques feudal tenets, and raises the question: who owns the land – the feudal landlord or the tiller? This is also an idea echoed in Bertolt Brecht's "*The Caucasian Chalk Circle* where the commune that produces the greatest harvest has greater right to the disputed land" (Lal x). Kambar picks up a fertility rite from his own culture and recreates it "viscerally in the play", as something palpable that exists around us even in this day and age. This is possible because Kambar is "sociologically and situationally" *in* that folk tradition (Dutta-Roy 17). Kambar opines:

The artist who draws his creativity strongly from his people articulates and places that sense of relevance . . . he might alight on structures, tones, myths and symbols which are so fundamental and hence so powerful, that issues like contemporaneity simply do not feature where he functions ("Folk" 149).

"As a man trying to articulate the creative urge of [his] people," he preserves the 'totality' of the folk genres in his theatre (Kambar "Folk" 148). *Jokumaraswami* is not a folk play proper; and yet, it throbs with the comprehensiveness and crudity of Bayalaata, the folk form Kambar borrows from: involving "dance, drama, narration, song, sex, death and religion" (151). In fact, the ritual worship of Jokumara the fertility god is performed with all its paraphernalia on stage right at the start of the play. Kambar is effectively able to translate this experiential reality into a tangible and full-bodied experience in theatre because of his anthropological intimacy to the ritual in its original context. Here, it may be pertinent to note that Kambar does not "use" tradition like Eliot does. On the contrary, as Dutta-Roy insightfully observes:

For Kambar, this tradition was very much like what Yeats said about tradition: “something that I have received from the generations, part of that compact made with my fellowmen made in my name before I was born. I cannot break from it without breaking from some part of myself” (17).

Kambar successfully constructs a world which “assumes a total and microcosmic character” (151). He describes how the “realm of entertainment” in folk cultures is essentially “compensatory” in nature. This pertains to a society where life is characterised by “socio-cultural inhibitions” and the often-religious framework of folk entertainment gives liberty and social sanction to the release of such limitations. Rajiv Taranath describes Kambar as a “myth-maker” and observes, “Celebration is, for Kambar, a primary mode of experience. And because the celebration has a musicality at once private and shared, the rhythm is at once private and contemporary, a blend of self and community” (145).

Tanvir’s *Charandas Chor* too strikes a celebratory note throughout. It celebrates the plebeian and their desire for truth and justice. The plot follows an ‘honest thief’ who inadvertently ends up taking four vows, one of which includes never marrying the queen even if she herself proposed him. It is the last vow – to never tell a lie – that in an ironic turn of events results in the thief’s death. Tanvir dropped the original conclusion where the Guru accepted the queen’s proposal after Charandas’ execution, and instead had the villagers deify Charandas as their spiritual hero. The entire play is spirited slapstick comedy, at the end of which the dramatic impact of the death is powerful. The play sets the common man, with his – as Tanvir puts it – “naivete, ignorance, conservative nature, old-fashioned belief in vows” against the hypocrisy of the rich and powerful (Cheerath). Tanvir also exposes at other points the hypocrisy and corruption of the so-called systems of law and order: the Havaldar can be bought by bribes; the minister relishes flattery; and the *munim* himself robs five royal mohurs.

Javed Malick observes, “...no matter...how traditional the basic plot, Tanvir.... weaves into any material...certain elements...which unmistakably point to the play’s political import and emphasize the harsh reality of the everyday life of the people” (165). Both *Charandas Chor* and *Jokumaraswami* make explicit socialist comments. Charandas turns into a Robinhood figure when he distributes grain to the poor. Tanvir fits his political commentary in an exclusively socio-political frame. On the other hand, Kambar makes political statements within the framework of the archetypal. Taranath points out, “...the tone always celebrates the primordial as against the local and the social ‘mores’” (144). As Kambar shifts “from socially

acceptable relationships into more powerful primordial bonds,” – Gowdathi-Basanna pairing being the case in point – “the menace of social propriety, hovering without in the form of ritual torture and death” adjoins (144). This menace exists in *Charandas Chor* as well. Charandas must die as the queen is incapable of appreciating his honest commitment to his vows. If the cause of Basanna’s sacrifice is Gowda’s vain feudal desire to claim all land and women as his own, that of Charandas’ execution is the pressure for the queen – the power system – to maintain her position of power. Since the queen is not just a politician but a tyrant, it is inevitable that someone who dares to challenge and confront her authority, must be eliminated, for the queen must save her face in front of the *praja*. In essence, though, the sacrifices of both Basanna and Charandas are attendant aftermaths of the oppressions of a power culture.

Kanhailal’s *Pebet* peels off the layers that go into the establishment of a power culture. It traverses the course between the immediately socio-political and the archetypal. His theatre is, in his own words, “rooted in [his] social, cultural and political milieu.” It is “a response to the dominant sense of the times” (“Philosophical” 207). But he functions in a mythical episteme. H.S. Shiva Prakash writes, Kanhailal’s characters “become larger-than-life archetypal substratum of empirical characters. In fact, they are more types than characters; more archetypes than types; more presences than archetypes” (3, 4). *Pebet* dramatizes a folk lullaby – about a mother bird protecting her children from a predatory cat – in the *phunga wari* repertoire. As a fireside story told to Manipuri children by their grandmothers, this story is entrenched in the collective Manipuri psyche; and Rustom Bharucha learnt while documenting the play that their memory is often complete with “*exact words and images* of the stories as narrated to them in their childhood” (“Pebet” 153). So, instead of using a first-time ritual, Kanhailal uses a traditional narrative and effectively subverts it to communicate his contemporary political import. He makes interventions in the middle of the original tale after the youngest Pebet is captured by the Cat, and includes a dream sequence visualised by Mother Pebet. This sequence delivers the thrust of his political commentary as the Cat dominates and indoctrinates all the Pebet children one by one. Through the Sanskritised brainwashing of the Cat, the Pebet children “stone their [own] mother in the name of the motherland” (Lal xi). Thus “[t]he real fear of Mother Pebet is not that her children will be eaten by the Cat, but rather, that they will be converted to ‘Cat culture’” (Bharucha “Pebet” 153). In this thinly disguised allegory, Kanhailal represents the Meitei tribe as the Pebet bird family – with the seven children representing the seven Meitei clans – and the Cat is representative of the Vaishnavite forces that have dominated the tribal culture. *Pebet* undertakes the quest for identity of the Meitei

tribe, and this is possible because of the blend of the political sensibility of Kanhailal and the symbolic potential of the folk narrative which he exploits and enlarges in his play. The ritual of oral storytelling that this play is inspired from, becomes the ritual of the motherland and the usurper when transferred to the stage. The very being of the actors embodies the resistance to the cultural colonisation that Kanhailal and his people have suffered. Here too, the anthropological intimacy with the ritual of oral storytelling and the cultural proximity to the particular *phunga wari* narrative, imbues Kanhailal's theatrical narrative with a sense of immediacy in terms of resistance against cultural domination. The movement of the traditional narrative from the domestic context of being a *phunga wari* tale to the immediate socio-political context of the Manipuri cultural struggle, adds meaning to, and enriches, the original narrative. As it gets transformed by Kanhailal's contemporary interventions, it engages in the Manipuri search for identity, and at once universalises the experience as it demonstrates how marginalized cultures protest against dominant ones. The play indulges in an exploration of the tactics of domination and oppression when the Cat trains the Pebet kids into adopting Cat-caterwauls and slowly makes them fight each other, exemplifying a classic divide-and-rule policy. Furthermore, it also illustrates how the subjugated revolt against the oppressive when a Pebet kid bites Cat's backside instead of licking it; this is the beginning of their resistance. Clearly, *Pebet* is not only an inquiry into the establishment of power culture, but also a lesson in the stratagem of resistance and revolt. Thus, Kanhailal uses the *phunga wari* tradition of storytelling to symbolise the resistance of the marginalised natives and tribals of Manipur.

“Kanhailal's theatre, in spite of deriving strength from tradition, aims at a catharsis that alerts the spectator to the specific challenges of his immediate context” (Shiva Prakash 3). Kanhailal says, “If we speak politically, my political sense of theatre is to disturb you. To make you frightened. That is involvement.... When you experience this state, you will be able to perceive” (“Philosophical” 206). His is “a theatre of transmission, transformation” (207). When Kanhailal mentions tradition, he means the primitive theatre, remnants of which he may have found in martial arts and in various rites and rituals of Manipur (198). Kanhailal tells Lakshmi Subramanyam that the Meitei tribe has a pronounced martial tradition and a rich repertoire of folk culture, many of the elements of which – like nature-lore and body-techniques – he has used in his theatre. *Pebet* is not meant strictly for the proscenium stage. The first production took place in a Polo Ground as part of a Jatra Festival. Kanhailal's theatre moves beyond words and proscenium space into the paralinguistic and open space physical theatre, in *Pebet*. The entire performance space is transformed by the energy and vitality of the actors' bodies as their

intense rhythmic body movements pervade the whole space. A holistic approach to the use of the body – in contrast to the dominance of speech in western-style theatre – is inherent in primitive cultures from whom Kanhailal learns and borrows his theatre techniques. His actors embody the words, and that takes precedence over uttering them (201). What distinguishes Kanhailal’s style from the other two dramatists is the stark minimalism in his theatre. The whole play follows a lyrical repetition of the phrase “Ha Pebet Te Tu” and is devoid of any other words. “Indeed, the few exchanges of dialogue between the Pebet and the Cat are borrowed verbatim from the oral tradition of the story” (Bharucha “Pebet” 152). These exchanges echo the oral tradition of *phunga wari* as Kanhailal uses the inner rhythm of the Meiteilon language to engage in a search for Meitei identity. To this effect Lakshmi Subramanyam writes, “Kanhailal remains in the foreground of modern Indian Theatre in his quest for experimentation even as he draws his inspiration from the long theatrical traditions of Manipur” (12).

Kambar too draws inspiration from his rural Kannada theatrical traditions. However, he claims inheritance to his folk tradition like W.B. Yeats does to his Irish tradition: as part of one’s blood. Kambar writes, “I belong geographically to a village, and sociologically to what was considered to be an oppressed, uneducated class. I am therefore, a folk person simply because I honestly cannot be anything else” (“Folk” 148). As Taranath notes, “Kambar draws his texture of experience mainly from his sense of space...[and] [e]nvironment to him is the sense of place...” (146) Taranath goes on to draw a connection between Kambar’s unrelenting relationship with place and his social background as “he is distant from the contrasts central to the upper caste inheritance...” (146) On the other hand, Tanvir was born in a socially well-placed family and grew up in Raipur, a small town surrounded by villages, where the line between the town and the country was blurred. Katyal quotes Malick: “Although [his] immediate family did not have direct connection with the countryside, several of his uncles...did. It was through them that he had his first exposure to the rural life and its songs and music” (“Growing” 3). Thus, Tanvir’s affinity with rural Chhattisgarhi forms like Nacha had roots in his formative experiences, as also the Chhattisgarhi dialect which he grew up listening, and which later became the language of his plays. However, as a man with western education, his psyche differed from that of Kambar whose primary way of thinking related to a mythical understanding.

Tanvir’s is a “style of theatre which is both ‘traditional’ in the sense of being oriented towards folk and popular forms, and modern in the sense of being alert to the major issues and

concerns of contemporary existence and experience” (Malick 164). Though he abundantly uses folk dance and Satnami *panthi* songs along with Nacha actors, *Charandas Chor* is far from an authentic Nacha production. Tanvir always maintained that he was only running after the folk performer, never the folk form, since the performer himself was the embodiment of the form. Tanvir realised the significance of rural theatre early on: “...there is no reason why India, which already has a living indigenous theatre of this kind should not strive to make capital of it for the sake of its contemporary cultural requirements” (Katyay “Connecting” 109).

All three dramatists developed their “own specific formula of approaches to and uses of the ‘folk’” (Lal viii). “Kanhailal, normally not associated with the decorative nature of the folk bandwagon”, created a socio-political and religious protest theatre “through minimalist design to express the Manipuri political struggle for identity (not normally a ‘folk’ concern)”. Kambar “powered the sheer primal energy of ritualistic theatre of worship onto the proscenium stage”, while “Tanvir achieved the opposite” by “telling a secular story in a nonliterary language, preserving the heartwarming looseness...of his rural Chhattisgarhi cast” (viii, xv). Kambar, Tanvir and Kanhailal work in the folk theatrical space while pouring their own modern critical consciousness into the space to make it contemporarily relevant. This is possible since tradition is not like stagnant water, but a flowing stream. Coming full-circle to Kapila Vatsyayan’s observations: “One may conclude that these traditions had an in-built mechanism of acceptance of ‘change’, of variety, of modification within a well-defined system of unity, and the ‘eternal’” (6).

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