



EMBODYING RESISTANCE IN HEISNAM KANHAILAL'S THEATRE OF THE EARTH: *PEBET AND MEMOIRS OF AFRICA*

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Abstract

The only primary resource that a performer has is the human body. In theatre, as in other performing arts, the body becomes the site for absorbing, interpreting, churning and expressing ideas. In the contemporary landscape of theatre in India, Heisnam Kanhailal's performative language strikes a starkly distinct note. His theatrical vocabulary is created through a physical and visceral process rooted in—and emanating from—the body, in contrast to a psychological process drawing on textual interpretations. His actor-training methods as well as theatrical practice rely heavily on the ethnic and body traditions of Manipur, while his productions seek to address the lived social, political and historical realities of his people. Despite drawing on inspiration from his native land, the theatre of Kanhailal transcends into acquiring universalist proportions. This is made possible through the being of the performer whose body becomes a communicative vessel embodying symbolic ideas. This paper seeks to examine the blending of a physical performative language with a heightened consciousness of socio-political experience, as it features in Kanhailal's theatre practice. Two plays, *Pebet* and *Memoirs of Africa*, shall serve as exemplification through this exploration.

Keywords: performing body, resistance, socio-political experience, theatre of the earth, Kanhailal, Manipur

The theatre of Heisnam Kanhailal stands tall and distinct on the rich landscape of contemporary theatre practice in India. With its unique style of non-verbal and physical dramaturgy, his theatre group, Kalakshetra Manipur, has been able to perfect a theatre that is truly experimental and breaks free from the oppressive hold of psychological-realism as practised in the colonial vestige of the proscenium. Gestures, rhythmic movements, non-linguistic vocal sounds and a trance-like ritualistic viscosity permeate the

performance space, enveloping the performers and the audience in a shared experience. This experience harks simultaneously to the past, the present and the future as the mythico-poetic traditions of the Meitei community infuse life into the creative representation in theatre, in an attempt to register protest against the oppressive truths of the Meitei people. To understand Kanhailal's performance grammar is to be acquainted with the physical culture of Manipur. He refers to his theatre as 'theatre of the earth' – truly grounded in the

ritualistic and ancient lore of his land. Referring to Kalakshetra Manipur, Manorama Tripathy writes, "Its method can be described as theatre of the body as well as theatre of resistance" (59).

Kanhailal's brand of political theatre is not propagandist, and shuns any overt assertion of a flag-bearing political ideology in the convention of popular political theatre. Instead, Kalakshetra practices a more nuanced affirmation of a fundamental idea of resistance that plays out through a mode of the archetypal and the mythical. In an interview with Lakshmi Subramanyam, he clarifies: "I believe that theatre cannot change the whole of society. One can only hope to create awareness.... The idea of resistance in my theatre is incarnated by the body of the actor and represents a collective and communal vision" (4). It is the body of the actor—complete in an organic mutuality of the inner and outer being—that Kanhailal's vision holds supreme. No extravagance of light, sound, setting, prop, costume or dialogue is required to convey the spirit of survival and protest that runs through his productions. An interplay of sensorial memory, body dynamics, repeated operation through images, gestural movement and lyricism creates a 'ritual theatre' that establishes an encounter between the organic actor and spectator. Kanhailal's spectator is not a passive recipient of plot progression; nor are they the impassioned viewers of political contention. Instead, his is a spectator charged with the energizing vitality of a visceral experience that alerts and disturbs, simultaneously creating perceptions "that lie between experience and reflection" (Kanhailal "Sabitri" 81). This is achieved through a blending of their "biological and creative energies with the social energy in order to identify the 'being' of an actor. This is what Sabitri has been able to accomplish—she believes that she is primarily a social being shaped by culture, and then an artist" (84). Through the course of the evolution of Kanhailal's theatre philosophy, the human body has come to be understood as possessing a "primeval character" constantly striving to express "natural human behaviour". This ability to "transform the 'natural'" and express it as the 'artificial' is actualised through a deconstruction of

social conditioning and shedding off of inhibitions in physical expression (Kanhailal "Ritual" 33).

No experimenter of Kanhailal's theatre can escape the profound impact generated by the performing body of his partner in life and in theatre, Sabitri Heisnam. She remains the centre that holds all of his performative visions together and has the electrifying power to transform any space into a performance space permeated by poetic manifestations of primordial urges. Talking after witnessing the Kanhailal-Sabitri work-process in 2008, Richard Gough reflects:

I felt I was seeing a truly great world artist in action, on the stage, working with her internal energy and making these incredibly eloquent images. ... It also reminded me of how some of the great directors of the twentieth century have a truly great actor-performer. ... However, that is both a strength and a weakness in a way—for how is one going to train the next generation? If the vision is embodied in one great performer, then isn't it also almost 'undermining' those who follow? (150)

Gough's apprehensions are not without merit. Indeed, the crystallisation of the theatre theory of Kalakshetra is most visibly and powerfully manifest in Sabitri. Much of it may be ascribed to the fact that she has been a forerunner and partner in Kanhailal's artistic evolution, and has been instrumental in practically realising his experimental visions through all stages of his journey. Further credit may go to her deep intimacy and organic interaction with the natural environment and ancient cultural lore of her land. In his introduction to *Memoirs of Africa*, Bharucha comments, "Sabitri's performance has to be seen in order to realize the possibilities of transcendence in contemporary theatre. ... But if she achieves this flight, it is because her feet are planted firmly on the ground" (Kanhailal "Memoirs" 75). Kanhailal attributes Sabitri's capacity for authentic expression to an amalgamation of technique and rootedness in her ritualistic, tribal and rustic environment. And responding to concerns such as the one expressed by Gough, he maintains that this spirit also guides the actor-training process that his group has forged. Young Kalakshetra actors are initiated into a process

of deconstruction of the rigidities and artificial behavioural sophistication that one's being acquires over time. They undergo vigorous spiritual and physical renewal through the means of de-conditioning exercises (known as psycho-physical exercises) along with breath control, locating the energy sources in the body and so on (Kanhailal "Ritual" 35-6). The early influences of Badal Sircar's psycho-physical exercises stimulated a profound interest in Kanhailal towards his own indigenous resources. But gradually he realised that these exercises were redundant for his rural actors as they did not need to be 'freed' from social inhibitions in quite the same way as Sircar's urban actors. Instead, the inspirations for Kanhailal's actor-training and vision of theatre lie closer home, within the ritualistic and physical culture of Manipur. Ranging from the Manipuri martial art tradition of Thang-Ta, the shamanistic tradition of *Maibi* performances, the fertility ritual of *Lai Haraoba*, oral traditions such as *phunga wari*, and the meditative practices of *Hirikomba* and *Vipasana* – source "materials have been transformed in [our] laboratory into a process, which becomes [our] own" (Subramanyam 9). This quality too is a gift of his native legacy as Kanhailal observes, "Transforming material in a refined way is inherent to the Meitei psyche" (6). It is worthwhile to point out that two central images that guide his physical training methods are that of 'waves' and 'soft mud'. "In the image of the wave, Kanhailal stresses both the fluidity of movement and a sense of limitlessness. Just as waves blend into one another, movements can never stop. Even when they are broken, the inner pulse of movement has to continue". On the other hand, the image of 'soft mud' evokes the necessity of "physical discipline" through which "[T]he actor's limbs have to be moulded" (Bharucha "World" 24).

In Kanhailal's theatrical language, the performing body occupies a pronounced centrality in its myriad shades of expression—innocence, vitality, suffering, agony, rage, resistance. The foregrounding of the performer's body is accompanied by a simultaneous negation of all paraphernalia of contemporary theatre. In his article titled "Ritual Theatre", Kanhailal explains:

We get clues *via negativa*. This is how we are free from the theological constraint of theatre where the playwright reigns omniscient. We are free, too, from...psychologically motivated acting, from pretending, from illusions created by heavy sets, light, costume and make-up. What is left to us is the body of the actor, the only human resource, and an empty space (39).

Indeed, the setting in both *Pebet* and *Memoirs of Africa*, is an open space signifying a universality of locale. The lights are general lights enough for vision, and there are no changes in their intensity, no fade-ins, fade-outs or zones. The musicality is brought about by the vocal singing of the performers, without any kind of instrumentation accompanying their human voices. The costumes are traditional Manipuri costumes called *phaneks* for the women and simple *dhotis* or trousers for the men. An utter minimalism of spoken words further characterises both plays, as the entire performance narrative thrives on a physicality of expression mediated through the body. *Pebet* does not rely on dialogues to advance the narrative. Instead, a varied lyrical repetition of the phrase "ha pebet te tu" punctuates the performance narrative which is primarily created out of dance-like rhythmic gestural movements. The few exchanges of dialogue between Mother *Pebet* and the Cat are in the native Meiteilon language. *Memoirs of Africa* too registers a minimalism pervading orality. The few dialogues in *Pebet* are further pared down in *Memoirs*. The phrase "ha ho ee ha ri" is variously repeated and "sung in a style inspired by the *Thawai Mi Kouba*, which is a chant sung by the *maibis* (priests) during ritual celebrations and on occasions when a person falls ill" (Kanhailal "Memoirs" 92). Explaining the process of creating the two plays, Kanhailal writes:

I took up the ritual with Sabitri, with the song 'Ha Loi eeee Loi eeee'...When we went deeper into the process of repeated singing, we felt as if our minds were being invaded by images of suffering souls. Then, we began physically improvising so as to absorb the mental images into our bodies. Thus, *Pebet* and *Memoirs of Africa* were created. The repetition of the images, operated across different dimensions and meanings, and helped transform the

performances into live theatre" (Kanhailal "Trance" 21).

The idea of suffering, for Kanhailal, is all-pervasive. It is at the root of the genesis of his creative expressions. And it is this sense of immanent suffering that his performers are trained into absorbing into their psychic and physical beings so as to later be able to communicate through their embodied presence in the theatre space. In his article titled, "Theatre is Only a Link Between Heritage and Community", he explains:

My main theme in this new theatre is suffering—personal, social, political—of all kinds. We suffer because of social and political forces working within us ... suffering is at the core of everything ... In all respects, degradation—political, economic, social and moral—is affecting us. ... All this leads to what I call total suffering (429).

Kanhailal's theatre has evolved out of a sincere dialogue with the social and historical realities of his people. The systematic erasure of Meitei tribal identity by Vaishnavite forces propagated by the eighteenth-century monarchs Garib Niwaz (1709-1748) and Bhagyachandra (1763-1798), as well as the pervasiveness of violence and volatility in Manipur till the present day, form the impetus for his political consciousness. Referring to the aggressive imposition of Vaishnavism over Meitei tribal life specifically during the reign of Garib Niwaz, Bharucha writes:

It involved such measures as the destruction of the traditional *lai* (gods), the burning of ancient manuscripts, the banning of the Meithei script and its replacement by the Bengali script, the introduction of the Hindu calendar and system of *gotras*, enforcement of Hindu dietary laws, and the sanctification of the first recorded instances in Manipuri history of *sati* ("The World" 15).

It is this oppression and suffering of the community spirit of the Meitei people that guides Kanhailal's quest for Meitei identity in *Pebet*. First performed at a Jatra festival in Imphal in 1975, *Pebet* "exposes the savagery of cultural indoctrination through the deceptive structure of a folk tale" (Bharucha "World" 17). On the other hand, in

Memoirs of Africa (1985), "the vision of oppression acquires an almost universal idiom" (19). *Pebet* marked the evolution of Kanhailal's theatre into a non-verbal and physicalised embodiment of a poetics of resilience and protest. Based on a *phunga wari* tale—repertoire of fireside stories narrated to Manipuri children by their grandmothers—the play dramatizes a folk lullaby in order to engage in a search for Meitei collective identity. The story is of a Pebet bird family comprising of the Mother and her seven children—representing respectively the Meitei tribe and its seven clans. A predatory Cat—explicitly Vaishnavite in his appearance—captures a Pebet kid. He is finally forced to exit disappointed as the Mother manages to rescue her child by engineering a clever trick. Keeping the beginning and end of the traditional fable intact, Kanhailal makes the politics of this allegory felt in the middle of the narrative where he innovates a fantasy sequence. This sequence is half-dream, half-real as it is a figment of Mother Pebet's imagination and yet plays out in the real, tangible space of the world of performance and beyond. The Cat, having captured the youngest Pebet, slowly manages to lure all the remaining Pebet children. The process of indoctrination and domination is advanced in a classic divide-and-rule policy. He teaches them Cat-caterwauls and trains them in the language of the oppressor. As Rustom Bharucha points out in his note on the play, "The 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'" ("Pebet" 153). This is a clear political allegory representing the Vaishnavite colonial domination of the Meitei tribal culture. *Pebet's* narrative traverses the odyssey from "[H]umiliation resulting from indoctrination" to a defiant proclamation of selfhood further to an eventual and enduring conviction in the spirit of emancipation (Bharucha "World" 14). This development of a mode of resilience underlies the narratives of both the plays, although the manifestations of this ideal differ considerably.

Though *Memoirs of Africa* has no story as such, the narrative unfolds through a repeated infliction of violence on Mi by three men referred to as Mimanu. They are personifications of evil while

the figure of Mi represents the eternal human condition. As in *Pebet* (which begins with the birthing of the Pebet children), the narrative in *Memoirs* begins with a foregrounding of the reproductive and creative energies of life. Mi sits like a seed waiting to flower, and gradually enters a process of consciousness as she becomes aware of the various parts of her body. Sabitri—who plays Mi—moves from embodying the metaphor of a full-grown tree being systematically uprooted by Mimanu to assuming a more visibly human form in the stance of the archetypal slave labourer being exploited by landowners. Two young women referred to as Nupi, embody the sources of creativity, and act as sources of revival and rejuvenation for a consistently oppressed Mi. Unlike *Pebet* that ends on an entirely positive note, *Memoirs* concludes with an affirmation of the survival instinct in the face of unceasing oppression and despair. At the end, Mi's "voice is dead, but her face radiates a new energy, eternally alive" (Kanhailal "Memoirs" 92).

While playing Mother Pebet, Sabitri's physical vocabulary engenders a haunting theatrical aura assisted by the poetic movement of her being which strikes a feminine register throughout. On the other hand, through her enactment of Mi in *Memoirs*, she is able to transcend categorisations of gender and evoke a fundamentally human imagination. In essence, the play is about "the almost primordial memory of oppression that activates the present and may continue to haunt the future" (Kanhailal "Memoirs" 72). Kanhailal's close friend and collaborator, the poet L. Samarendra Singh ponders, "Perhaps Manipur is a kind of Africa for us" (72). It is his Manipuri poem, *Africagee Wakhanda Gee* (roughly translated as "Thinking of Africa"), that inspired the theatrical narrative of *Memoirs*. Metaphorically, Africa stands for a sense of never-ending struggle, a symbol of oppression and a continuing resilience ensuring that it cannot ultimately be suppressed (72).

The symbolic parameters of the idea of Africa as expressed in Samarendra's poem and that of the *phunga wari* tale of Pebet, are capitalised upon and enlarged by Kanhailal in the theatre space. This reinforces the fundamental nature of the

theatre space as a symbolic space with tremendous potential to transform narratives into concrete images to be communicated to a perceptive audience. Over the years, the interpretive boundaries of *Pebet* have expanded from the specific engagement with Meitei identity to a universal spirit of resistance against oppression. While explicating the need for creating consciousness before any revolt can attain its true purpose, Kanhailal points out, "This is not only in Manipur—I am taking the case of Manipur because I live here—it is universal" ("From 'Theatre'" 429).

For Kanhailal, theatre is not mere spectacle; rather it should work as an educative agency that helps the spectators come to their own reason after experiencing the theatre. He acknowledges the influence of Badal Sircar in realising "the importance of the social experience of theatre, and the role of theatre as a social action capable of creating a sociopolitical awareness that can in turn lead to a sociopolitical change" ("Ritual" 35). Although one can discern in Kalakshetra productions the similarities with Grotowski's Poor Theatre and Sircar's Third Theatre, Dharwadker opines, "Kanhailal was more radical...in making movement and gesture the core of his performances, to the virtual exclusion of words." His intention in every production is "to awaken the sense of the audience and then come to the intellect" ("From 'Theatre'" 427). By creating a sensuous theatre, his actors "aim at the senses of the audience, to alert their intellect, create a vision" (431). Such an outcome is non-viable through the Western approach of actor-text-characterisation in which psychological interpretation of the character reigns supreme while rendering the whole of body immobile and inexpressive. Kanhailal's approach is a drastic shift from this convention and takes the actor-character-text route. For him, "[C]haracter is no longer treated as a 'human' character, it is transformed into images. [We] look at the character and discover his tensions. [We] get a series of tensions which are transformed into a series of poetic images" (430). This poetic transformation of human impulses and lyrical expression draws its energy from the ritualistic and physical culture of Manipur in which Kanhailal's 'theatre of the earth' is rooted.

It is through the blending of a physicalised performance grammar and a profound sense of the Manipuri lived reality that Kanhailal's theatre creates intense visceral and mental experiences mutually for the performers and audience. Ultimately, imbibing the rhythms of Manipur's nature and body lore into their being, churning and re-presenting them in a theatrical language, Sabitri and her co-actors are able to embody the spirit of resistance against the realities of socio-political oppression. Kanhailal's dramaturgy makes a powerful case for the idea of theatre as socio-political expression while manifesting the potential of local body traditions in the theatrical space.

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