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Heisnam Kanhailal's contribution to Manipuri drama and *Kabui Keioiba*: A brief Ecocritical study of the play

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Abstract:

Any discussion on the theatre of Manipur is impossible without reference to the stalwart of modern Indian theatre- Heisnam Kanhailal. The plays of these Kanhailal are replete with politics, history and a quest for a distinctive Manipuri identity against the larger idea of a national identity. Regarded as one of the most innovative theatre practitioners of post-independence India, Heisnam Kanhailal belongs to a rare band of playwrights and directors who have consistently refused to classify aesthetics from politics, myth from modernity, and environment from culture. His *Kabui Keioiba* (1973) which adapts a tribal myth of a half-man, half-tiger creature stands out as theatrical articulations of indigenous worldviews under siege. The present article would explore Heisnam Kanhailal's contributions to the strengthening of Manipuri theatre and also study his play *Kabui Keioiba* in the light of some of the ecocritical dimensions. By analysing the play in terms of mythic hybridity the study will attempt to discuss how it foregrounds the themes of symbiosis, spiritual ecology and environmental justice and form a profound interconnection between nature and culture. The theoretical inputs of Cheryll Glotfelty and Lawrence Buell would further be taken up to understand the play as a site of ecological thinking.

Keywords: *Kanhailal, Manipuri theatre, Kabui Keioiba, ecology, environment*

Heisnam Kanhailal: An Estimate of his contribution to Manipuri theatre

Towards the later part of the sixties the theatre in Manipur was showing signs of radical transformation due to the arrival of new ideas from the West and also from the seat of theatre movement in India- Calcutta of that time. The influence of *Intimate theatre* as practised by Richard Schechner, Grotowski and Sircar's *Third Theatre* could be visible in the works of the new dramatists and directors who were ready to experiment with the prevalent theatre tradition.

H. Kanhailal (1941–2016) was one who wanted to practise experimental theatre and in 1969 formed *Kalakhsetra Manipur* though its regular theatre productions began only in 1972 with the staging of a short play *Tammalai* (The Haunting Spirit). The faith of Padmashree Awardee Kanhailal in the alternative theatre was strengthened further by his interaction with Badal Sircar when the later visited Manipur in 1972 and staged four of his plays there. Kanhailal went to Calcutta and had learnt the ways of Sircar's third theatre involving psycho-physical exercises. This helped him to improve upon his theatre art and develop a style of theatre expressed through sharper sense of image and movement. Upon his return Kanhailal headed the new movement in the recognition of the body and its language. His plays have been treated as the expressions of the larger mood of the society though at times criticised for being too radical.

One of the important productions was *Tammalai* (The Haunting Spirit) which is based on the popular folk tale. In this play Chandra Kangal, a son of widow, gradually prospers after he marries a princess. From a lazy boy he was transforming into a hardworking, honest person but he had his misfortunes stored as his hopes for a better future were destroyed by few goons. When humiliated Chandra becomes so enraged that at the spur of the moment he kills the goons. The play portrays in a bleak manner the despair that emanates out various social menaces including unemployment.

His *Kabui-Keioiba* is another very significant play that moves around an archetypical figure in Manipuri folklore. In the play the protagonist *Kabui-Keioiba*, a predator, abducts a girl named *Thaba* on some sort of instigation by an old woman. However, at one point Thaba is able to run away from the abductor after putting the house under fire and killing the child she had from *Kabui-Keioiba*. The act of killing the child and the women's handing over the girl to the abductor are both justified by the respective characters. In the former's case the murder of the child seemed essential since she was not of pure origin and had she lived she would have brought danger to the tribe. On the other hand, the latter's action is justified on the ground that had the girl not been handed over, even if it is done through trickery, to the evil spirit, he would have caused trouble to the rest of the society.

In *Khomdon Meiroubi*, written by W. Kamini and directed by Kanhailal, is shown how the economic corruption practised by the corrupt traders and politicians affect the common people. It uses the technique of personification in a scene where a rice bag played by an actor follows the instructions of the traders from outside of Manipur without paying any heed to the cries of the people in distress.

In his quest for innovative theatre practices and his effort to bring in freshness to the medium, Kanhailal experimented frequently with non-actors. He produced *Nupi Lal* (Women's War) with the help of nearly 70 women who usually do business in the local markets of Imphal. The story of the play is based on the historic *Nupi Lal* that took place twice in 1904 and 1939-40 respectively. On both the occasions the women traders rose against the injustice caused to the Manipuri people by the British officials. These popular uprisings by the women, though lived for a very short period, have left an indelible mark upon the history of Manipur. The performance took place not on proper stage but out in the open at the campus of Janasthana Higher Secondary School.

After the successful presentation of *Nupi Lal*, Kanhailal was inspired to carry on his experimentation with another group of people belonging to rural village called Umatheili. During his interactions He learnt that the elite class of the village used to oppress the poor villagers in many ways and out of his session of listening to stories he picked up one with the title *Sanjennaba* (Cowherd). 'In this acute political fable, an unemployed cowherd seeks support for a job during the ploughing season. He gets the jobs but only after he has been blackmailed, cheated and threatened by various villagers. At the close of the play, he accumulates an enormous amount of grain through payments for his work, but little by little all the grain disappears as people come forth to demand their share on one pretext of the other. At the end, the cowherd is as hungry and poor as he was before getting the job.' (Bharucha 753)

Apart from these Kanhailal has produced two other plays that are considered as more significant ones- *Pebet* and *Memoirs of Africa*. In the first play he chose a story which is deeply etched in the minds of the Manipuri people in order to comment on the prevalent political and cultural scenario of the state. Kanhailal uses the *Pebet* meaning a small bird that is rarely seen, possibly on the verge of extinction, therefore, precious and relates it to the traditional beliefs and cultures of Manipur that are also equally threatened by various factors and needs to be protected. The story of the play revolves around a mother Pebet who guards her family by thwarting the rapacious intentions of a Cat. Being aware of her lack of the physical strength to overpower the Cat the mother Pebet tries to dissuade the predator by flattering the Cat and lifts its ego. Through her actions the Pebet was buying time so that her children grow up to be able to protect themselves. But when they grow up in spite of her resistance to the aggressiveness of the Cat, it captures the youngest in her family. However, at the end after much tactful handling of the predator the mother is able to rescue the child from the clutches of the Cat. The family of the Pebet is reunited while the Cat moves away due to its defeat though temporarily.

The second of the two most significant productions of Kanhailal was *Memoirs of Africa*. The play is based on the original poem *Africagee Wakbanda Gee* by A. Somorendra Singh. *Memoirs of Africa* transcends the spatial treatment of the theme of oppression in relation to Manipur alone and presents it as something to be found everywhere. The play demonstrates the idea of survival in the face of violence to show to the world that the spirit of survival in human beings cannot be destroyed however forcefully they are put under attacks. In the play 'the predominant figures are Mi, an epic figure of humanity, who could be either male or female, nourished by two Nupis, young women embodying the deepest sources of creativity. The 'drama' of this intensely lyrical, half-hour theatre piece comes from the relentless persecution of Mi by three predatory men, the Mimanu, those who cannot be destroyed but are capable of destroying. Drawing on stereotypes of terrorists, insurgents, feudal landlords, Bruce Lee, and the 'churang-thawa' (child snatcher), the animality of the men is countered against Mi's unfailing capacity to survive their attacks.' (Bharucha 749)

Kabui Keioiba: An Ecocritical analysis

Basic Theoretical Perspectives

As one the major theories that revolutionized literary studies and analysis in the late twentieth century the advent of ecocriticism marked a major paradigmatic shift in how literature and the environment are understood to each other. Ecocriticism is primarily concerned with how literary and artistic representations shape, reflect, and challenge human perceptions of the natural world.

Ecocriticism is defined by Cheryll Glotfelty, a founding figure, as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (*The Ecocriticism Reader* xviii). It is a branch of critical approach which through its multiple disciplinary intersections such as environmental philosophy, ethics, history, anthropology, and ecology explores how texts influence and in turn also gets influenced by ecological cognizance. At the initial stage, ecocriticism concerned itself with simple representations of nature, the countryside life and the mystic wilderness. But, soon enough, with greater interest of critics and thinkers alike it developed to embrace a diverse set of spheres – environmental justice, urban ecology, ecofeminism etc.

Another pioneering voice of ecocriticism Lawrence Buell lays down a few characteristics of it. In his view, the nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device; human accountability to the environment is part of the text's ethical orientation; the environment is a process rather than a static background; and nature evokes an emotional or affective response (Buell 7-8). Although Kanhailal's theatre bears political and social connotations yet they are also seen to be deeply ecological, and *Kabui Keioiba* exemplifies a number of the traits stated here. One of the notable elements about Kanhailal's plays is that they are not universal parables on ecology but rather stories deeply rooted in socio-environmental history of Manipur. As such the eco critical analysis of the play needs attend to the indigenous world views, their oral histories, environmental consciousness. The indigenous ecological knowledge should be treated not as static folklore, but as living epistemologies capable of informing contemporary ecological thinking. (Shiva 2005)

An Ecocritical appraisal

First produced in 1973, Heisnam Kanhailal's play *Kabui Keioiba*, is based on a popular Rongmei Naga myth which surrounds the story of a half man and half tiger. In the story *Kabui Keioiba*, out of a hunting venture, kidnaps a girl who has seven brothers that eventually heads towards a conflict between human civilization and ferocity, natural world and human world and morality and myth. This folktale, as employed by Kanhailal, reaches beyond the conjecture of simple dramatization of a local folklore and acts as a powerful meditation between the human and the non human and ecological hybridity.

The play, as has already been stated, rests on the figure of *Kabui Keioiba*- half human half tiger. Such unusual formation should not be seen as an abnormality, as is commonly found in tribal societies, but rather as symbolic of an alternative worldview where the boundary between the human and animal world is permeable and enriched with spirituality. Animality is not considered a taboo in many indigenous societies. Instead it is revered as a part of the local cosmology and ancestral belief system. As such, the transformation of a man into a tiger does not produce any awkward sense but instead evokes oneness with the animal self in its resemblances to power, vulnerability and spirituality.

Taking into consideration the feature of ecocriticism, such type of hybridity as exemplified by *Kabui Keioiba*, questions the binary logic of Western humanism which positions nature as "other" to culture. In his essay *What Is Posthumanism?* Cary Wolfe explains that the human-animal margin is constructed to maintain ecological domination. (Wolfe 46) The play, *Kabui Keioiba*, through its hybrid protagonist uncovers this fiction and in doing so it reasserts a relational view of being based not in species boundaries but in interconnectedness.

The portrayal of tiger-man by Kanhailal is not mono-dimensional. It is neither a mere predatory species, nor a rogue but a tragic character who is misjudged for his apparent outlook and his instincts that do not match with the social codes of mankind. This underlying internal conflict points towards an overwhelming ecological tragedy: the detachment of modern humanity from its animal ancestry, their embodied compassion to the earth, and their spiritual bond with non human world.

Addressing the aspect of Eco-spirituality it may be observed that while Western ecological drama tends to be rational and didactic in its presentation of environmental crisis, *Kabui Keioiba* summons an eco-spirituality rooted in ritual. It is not organized around Aristotelian plot, but around cyclical time, chant, and invocation; it does not present forest, tiger, and spirit-world as scenic metaphors but as living presences evoked by the arrangement of performance.

This kind of ritual art borrows from indigenous worldviews, where animals are seen as ancestors and spirits are treated as parts of nature, with performance acting as a bridge between species. The abduction of the girl by the tiger-man is not just an act of violence; it is symbolic of return to the womb of nature, an engagement with the unrestrained energies of the earth. Her re-emergence into human society is not a victory for civilization but a humbling recognition of what has been sacrificed between wildness and modernity.

By presenting the myth of *Kabui Keioiba* of the Rongmei Naga tribe in Manipuri theatre, Kanhailal performs a cultural re-inscription. He treats the tribal folk not as a mere folkloric ornament but as a genuine source of knowledge. This holds particular importance in a place like Manipur where tribal histories and mythologies frequently discover themselves omitted from the prevailing narratives of the nation. By positioning *Kabui Keioiba* at the forefront of his theatrical endeavour, Kanhailal emphasizes the significance of indigenous perspectives and their ecological understandings.

From the standpoint of postcolonial criticism, this is an act of epistemic resistance. It opposes the logic of developmentalism that regards the forest as outdated, the tiger as a resource and the tribal as pre-modern. In *Kabui Keioiba*, the jungle holds sacred significance, the tiger assumes a liminal space and the myth is comprehended as cosmological.

Dealing with theatrical performance of the play in relation to ecology it may be suggested that the theatrical vision of Heisnam Kanhailal is profoundly based on an aesthetic characterized by minimalism, ritual and embodied experience. His plays do not merely depict ecological truths; they enact them- instinctively, physically and spiritually. In this context, his play lines up with what Una Choudhury describes as 'eco-theatre' - performance that stages ecological interconnections, exposes anthropocentric assumptions, and cultivates affective relationships with the more-than-human world. (Choudhuri 32) The tiger-man's movements in *Kabui Keioiba* rouses not only the power of a predator but also an intense sense of environmental anxiety. Here, the physical expressions become a medium of ecological expressions.

Conclusion:

As the founder of Kalakshetra in 1969, Kanhailal aimed to produce a theatre that was grounded in indigenous aesthetics, oral traditions and embodied memory. As an innovator he dismissed mainstream theatrical conventions, instead developing a unique performance language that prioritized physicality, silence and ritual over traditional scripted dialogue. Through his association with his wife, Sabitri Heisnam, Kanhailal remarkably expanded the extent of performative agency and representation of gender. By incorporating elements of Lai Haraoba, Shamanistic rituals and oral folklore his art form re-established the connection between performance and its spiritual and ecological roots.

Kanhailal's play *Kabui Keioiba* may be considered more than a simple as it attempts to revive indigenous myths, activate animal agency and ritualize ecological concerns. Through his constant experimentations Kanahaailal has successfully developed a dramaturgy rooted in local cosmologies and veneration for interspecies interdependence.

At a time when the world is facing ecological declination, cultural uniformity and lack of spirituality, Kanhailal's plays bring to fore the critical importance of listening – to the birds, ancestral stories and even the silences. If one runs after simple meanings of his plays then it must be remembered that he does not provide simple solutions. In this way, he re-invigorates the world through the potential for relationships, reverence and resistance. Thus, Kanhailal's legacy is not limited to the realm of theatre. It extends to cover ecological, ethical and epistemic aspects.

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