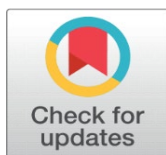
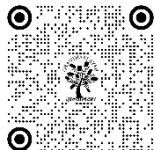


SILENCE AS THE RHETORIC OF RESISTANCE IN HEISNAM KANHAILAL'S THEATRE PRACTICE

Pranab Kumar Mandal ¹  

¹ Assistant Professor, Department of English, Ramakrishna Mission Residential College, Narendrapur and Ph. D Researcher, Department of English, Jadavpur University, Kolkata, India



Received 22 July 2022
Accepted 29 September 2022
Published 11 October 2022

Corresponding Author

Pranab Kumar Mandal,
pranab.mandal@rkmrc.in

DOI
[10.29121/shodhkosh.v3.i2.2022.179](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v3.i2.2022.179)

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Copyright: © 2022 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

With the license CC-BY, authors retain the copyright, allowing anyone to download, reuse, re-print, modify, distribute, and/or copy their contribution. The work must be properly attributed to its author.



ABSTRACT

The theatre practice of Heisnam Kanhailal and his cocreator of performance, Heisnam Sabitri is less of words, speeches and dialogues than found in conventional proscenium theatre. Both Kanhailal and Sabitri believe that theatre has a language of its own and that language is not necessarily a language of verbal communication. In their theatre, action is expressed more through body movements, physical gestures and sounds than through spoken words as they believe that non-verbal silent communication of a theatrical action or feeling is more powerful than the spoken ones. This unusual mode of theatrical narrative has helped Kanhailal to form a rhetoric of resistance against various forms of socio-political injustice that Manipur has historically gone through. The articulation of theatrical communication in his plays occurs more through silence, gestures, and sounds than through conventional verbal communications. He was creating in Manipur what his contemporary Pinter was creating in England, much at the same time, much in the same line, much with the same motif although with much difference in their context and artistic execution.

Keywords: Kanhailal, Sabitri, Silence, Resistance, Manipur, Theatre

Silence as the Rhetoric of Resistance in Heisnam Kanhailal's Theatre Practice

We communicate only too well, in our silence, in what is unsaid. (Bloom (1987) p. 26)

1. INTRODUCTION

Harold Pinter (1930-2008), the Nobel prize-winning British playwright makes the above observation with reference to the recurrent use of silence as a narrative strategy in his theatre practice. He found 'silence' to be an effective medium of communicating inexpressibility and more so, the unwillingness to express disgust, unreliability, elusiveness, evasiveness, and doubts of his characters. With this, he established in his prolific career as a playwright the fact that in '[a] language...where, under what is said, another thing is being said' (Bloom (1987) p. 25). The

Pinteresque silence has found enormous acceptability as a mode of resistance in the theatre practice in the west with increasingly rising political unrest everywhere.

2. SITUATING RESISTANCE IN THE CONTEXT OF MANIPUR

In India, especially in Manipur, the political, as well as the religious atmosphere has forever been quite turbulent. Rustom Bharucha painstakingly elaborates on the context of socio-political-religious unrest in Manipur in his book *The Theatre of Kanhailal: Pebet and Memoirs of Africa (1992)*. Bharucha draws a long history of political uncertainty and unrest in Manipur, from the days it was annexed by the British ruling in India in 1891, which was followed by the state being handed over to the private property owners to it earning the status of a Princely state in 1947, to its inclusion in the Indian Union as a Part C state in 1949. However, the Manipuri activists have considered this inclusion a trap as this led Manipur to be a puppet under the President of India without having any say in its political and economic development. Although Manipur was included under the Union Territories Act of 1963, the situation of unrest was not better. Bharucha writes, '[a]fter a tense period of President's Rule and the first culmination of the insurgency movement, which had started around 1965, Manipur eventually became a full-fledged state in January 1972' (Bharucha (1992) p.13). With AFSPA, the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act implemented in 1958, Manipur has always been under the watch of the State Machineries.

To add to this enormous political unrest in Manipur, the religious identity of the state is also very shaken. The state was forcefully Hinduised in the name of detribalization in the reign of King Garib Niwaz (1709-'48). The aggressive religious transformation happened 'to the extent of destruction of the traditional *lai* (gods), the burning of ancient manuscripts, the banning of the Meitei script and its replacement by the Bengali script, the introduction of the Hindu calendar and system of gotras...' (p. 15). The indigenous Meitei communities were forced to embrace Vaishnavism. The conflicts between pre-Vaishnav-Meitei and post-Vaishnav-Meitei continue to be felt even today in Manipur.

3. PERFORMATIVE METHODS OF KANHAILAL'S THEATRE

This enormity of crisis and unrest in terms of politics, economy and religion in Manipur has very justifiably found expression in the theatre practice of a son of the soil, Heisnam Kanhailal (1941-2016). With his theatre group named Kalakshetra Manipur, founded in 1969, Kanhailal used theatre as a medium of protest against all that Manipur has suffered. Almost all his plays reflect on some or the other crisis that Manipur has undergone and those reflections are tied with a spirit of resistance, for example, *Pebet* (1975) is based on the colonization of indigenous culture (Meitei) by an external cultural force (Vaishnavism), *Memoirs of Africa* (1986) is on the violence inflicted upon indigenous peoples in the process of political colonization, *Draupadi* (2000) is on the struggles of women (particularly physical and sexual violence) in Manipur, etc. Kanhailal, together with his cocreator of performance, his wife Heisnam Sabitri has established a cultural identity of Manipur with their very unique theatre practice which is exemplified through features such as the organic use of body-based acting; narrativising indigenous myths and rituals; spiritually connecting with nature in course of actor's training; and aesthetically combining songs, sounds and silence. Kanhailal's theatre exclusively evinces from his own cultural roots. In fact, he has consciously and effectively deurbanized modern Indian theatre by resorting to rural Manipur and representing indigenous Meitei nature-

lore and native-lore in his theatre. As Kanhailal and Sabitri have always practiced theatre as a form of resistance, they have never represented anything urban or not Manipuri, not even the language. The medium of their theatre has always been the local Meitei language.

The theatre practice that Kanhailal has propounded and that his cocreator of performance Ima Sabitri has exemplified is less of words, speeches and dialogues than found in conventional proscenium theatre traditions. They are rather precise and expressed more through body movements and silences than any prolonged verbal communications. Both Kanhailal and Sabitri believe that theatre has a language of its own and that language is not necessarily a language of verbal communication in the conventional sense of the term. Since their plays are written only in the Meitei language as Ima *does* not speak any other language, neither Hindi; English; nor any other Indian languages, their theatre has not failed to reach out to the spectators of different cultures and regions across the world. In their theatre, action is expressed more through body movements, physical gestures and sounds than through spoken words as they believe that non-verbal silent communication of a theatrical action or feeling is more powerful than the spoken ones. The articulation happens more through silence and gestures than through verbal communications. He was creating in Manipur what his contemporary Pinter was creating in England, much at the same time, much in the same line, much with the same motif although with much difference in their context and artistic execution.

Kanhailal's theatre training comprises various body movements, especially the techniques of Thang-ta, the martial arts tradition of Manipur. The central principle of this martial arts tradition of Manipur is to see with ears and hear with eyes. Every utterance is consciously felt by various parts of the body. Body movement training is held in the mountains, in the waters, and also in their studio. A culmination of meditation, self-realization and self-revelation happens through the theatre training. Kanhailal writes:

Sometimes contrary to the western tradition, I found curious and fresh the metaphors used by traditional artists/masters I worked with: 'moon on the water', 'the floating body', 'sensory rhythm', 'throat does not sing', 'place the soul in the space', 'planting the body in the earth'...sometimes with very few words, or through silence, the master created, as a sculptor does, a body-in-life of the student – not by drilling lessons into him but by encouraging a process of self-discovery. (Kanhailal (2016) p. 12-13)

The rehearsal process of Kanhailal's theatre does not begin with a fixed dramatic text. The text develops through the rehearsals and is shaped through the performance. This practice of developing a performance text through rehearsals or practices is much similar to Richard Schechner's composition of environmental theatre¹. Schechner's idea of environmental theatre is based on a conscious rejection of the orthodox proscenium performance tradition. He experiments with performance space and performance environment in each of his productions. Kanhailal's theatre practice, though not necessarily maintains this rigidity in terms of choosing a non-proscenium performance space, is flexible enough to be performed in different types of performance spaces—be it in the urban proscenium theatre space, be it in an open-air performance space like that of Badungduppa's sal forest² or be it in the studio space of his own theatre group Kalakshetra Manipur. However, it should be noted that Kanhailal's theatre practice is predominantly composed for a non-proscenium theatre space. In fact, his deviation from the urban culture dominated orthodox proscenium tradition and taking recourse to indigenous Meitei-Manipuri culture to practice his theatre was a conscious attempt to Indianise modern theatre practice in India by returning to the root of Indian culture, the villages. Therefore, by composing his plays to be flexibly staged in both proscenium

and non-proscenium performance spaces, rooting his theatre to his indigenous cultural contexts, and ignoring exaggerated and expensive performance elements, Kanhailal has consciously and deliberately resisted against western-influenced urban theatre practices in India.

4. SILENCE AS THE RHETORIC OF RESISTANCE

In Kanhailal's theatre process, meditative silence is an essential part of actors' training as the actors are trained to meditate and feel the silence of the surrounding. He considers silence as a language of enormous power in itself. He comments in his essay titled 'Ritual Theatre':

Silence as a theatrically powerful language is the gift, of our process, of Sabitri. Particularly in her performance of Migi Sharang and Dakghar, Sabitri has shown the extraordinary power of the language of silence that can provoke the soul of the spectator. It is not a psychologically motivated behaviour but a genuinely spiritual act. (p. 57)

Usham Rojio in his article 'Kanhailal's *Dakghar*' notes that in Kanhailal's theatre practice silence 'has become a language where the pragmatics of silence itself is a myth' (Rojio (2016) p. 170). His ideas are very naturally and easily understood and exemplified by his cocreator of performance Sabitri who also takes the responsibility of demonstrating them to the actors. While teaching the actors about the idea of silence in theatre practice, Sabitri 'remind(s) other actors that it is the act of burning inside that counterpoises a live mask of helplessness – an act of silence that speaks powerfully' (p. 57). In all his major productions like *Thamnalai* (1972), *Pebet* (1975), *Memoirs of Africa* (1986), *Draupadi* (2000), and *Dhakghar* (2006) the 'act of burning inside' is represented through an 'act of silence' to exemplify a powerful mode of resistance. And for this, Sabitri has always been perhaps the most integral and effective part of Kanhailal's theatre practice. It is through Sabitri that Kanhailal's ideas are communicated. The tremendous crisis in Manipur has not impacted Sabitri any less. When her youngest son was imprisoned for getting involved in the insurgency movements in the late 1960s, she saw how brutally her son was tortured. She said nothing in the prison when she went to see him. Like Brecht's Mother Courage, she resisted her emotion with profoundly silent crying to the level of screaming in silence. Kanhailal refers to 'that painful moment when she deliberately fails to identify her son's corpse, shrugs her shoulders, then turns aside to scream silently' (Bharucha (1992) p. 20) and then asserts, 'Sabitri, I believe, is capable of this 'silent scream', not only because she is a great actress but because her life has prepared her to understand the terrifying contradictions of that moment' (p. 20).

5. PEBET: A CASE STUDY

If one reads the English translation of the performance text of *Pebet* done by Bharucha, one can see how the text is full of descriptions of actions than dialogues. One scene from the play may serve as an example here. The scene is titled 'Return to the Nest.'

Suddenly, the Pebets become silent and walk back to the nest, the exact position from which they had been lured when the fantasy of oppression began. The young Pebet, however, continues to be captured by the Cat.

Mother Pebet, who has observed and participated in the fantasy of oppression, begins to cry out for her child once more. She screams

T E T U!

lie on the floor in crouching positions, their faces bowed in surrender' (p. 52). Their complete submission to the Cat is suggested in the play when the Pebet children lick Cat's toes upon his order. Their doing so 'with kissing sounds in abject humiliation' is a painful exemplification of religious and political indoctrination of the Meitei religion and Manipuri culture, on which the play is based. The Cat even assumes the 'role of a deity' and forces the Pebet children to 'perform ritualistic homage' to him (53).

The next politics that the Cat plays is a 'divide and rule' one, where he motivates the Pebets to fight against each other. The performance text notes,

like a pair of bulls, the brothers proceed to fight, pressing their heads against one another. They make sharp fighting sounds...Then in an abrupt change in the style of fighting, the brothers begin to wrestle in the traditional Manipuri style of mukna. With a sliding motion of their feet, the brothers circle one another, their torsos almost parallel to the ground, their heads locked in each other's shoulders. There is a clinch, whereupon the older brother hoists his younger brother in the air, and then throws him on the ground. (54)

Kanhailal's taking recourse to Manipuri wrestling tradition to represent the fights between the Pebet siblings is an unmistakable reference to the conflicts among the Meitei peoples following their conversion to Vaishnavism. Pebet children acquiring the culture and language of the Cat is suggestive of Meitei people acquiring the culture and the rhetoric of Vaishnavism. It is also suggestive of political unrest in Manipur due to the brainwashing of Manipuri people by external political forces, as elaborated in the beginning of this paper. Finally, in the play, Mother Pebet saves her children from their tortuous existence under what is called the Cat-culture. She fools the Cat and frees her children from his clasp. The play ends with a conflict of cultures represented on the one hand with the frustrated and defeated Cat and on the other hand with the Pebet mother and children together, happily reunited. All along this journey of indoctrination/colonisation of Pebet children and their eventual liberation, the performance has predominantly used sounds, songs, and silences as modes of communication instead of clearly legible words and sentences as found in proscenium performance traditions.

Thus, the Pebet folktale surely serves a metaphoric purpose for Kanhailal. The Cat is a metaphor of external religious and political forces that are cunning, dominating, and destructive. In the case of Manipur, it surely resonates with its political and religious dominators as discussed at the beginning of the paper, who considered Manipur nothing but a hunting ground and the citizens their prey. Mother Pebet is perhaps Manipur in itself and the children are its citizens who had to work hard to protect themselves, not always with success. Bharucha writes, 'the real fear of Mother Pebet is not that her children will be eaten by the Cat, but rather than they will be converted to 'Cat-culture'' (p. 34). The resistance in the play comes 'when one of the Pebet sons bites the Cat's arse instead of licking it...(which) inevitably leads to torture and eventual freedom' (p. 35).

As to the performance productions of the play, the air of resistance was more prominent when it was first produced in 1975 at Polo Ground in Imphal. The socio-religious conflict between the Meitei and the Vaishnavism, along with the political conflicts following the Insurgency movements were pressing issues of that time and the production represented it in more ways than one. Bharucha talks about the first production where Mother Pebet emerged as 'a powerful figure holding on to a flag...made up of seven pieces of cloth from the turbans of the actors...as a symbol of resistance, a reminder to the Pebets that they must continue to fight for their identity' (p. 36).

6. CONCLUSION

Pebet is not a lone example of silence used as a rhetoric of resistance in Kanhailal's dramaturgy. The same resistance is found in other plays as well, which is achieved not through long speeches, slogans, or exaggerated stage props, but through a juxtaposition of silence, sounds, screams and songs. What is not verbally pronounced, creates more powerful resistance in Heisnam Kanhailal's theatre practice than what is pronounced does.

NOTES

- 1) Richard Schechner in America configured a theatre practice in the 1960s and 70s which he called 'environmental theatre' which rejected proscenium theatre space and redefined performance space in the form of 'studio' theatre space or 'intimate' theatre space. For details, Schechner's book *Environmental Theatre* (1994) may be read.
- 2) 'Under the Sal Tree' is a theatre festival organised by Badungduppa Kalakendra at Goalpara in Assam. This festival is known for its unique performance space in a sal forest where open-air performances happen without any technological support. The festival was started in the year 2008 under the leadership of late Sukracharjya Rabha, a disciple of Kanhailal.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

REFERENCES

- Bharucha, R. (1992). *The Theatre of Kanhailal : Pebet and Memoirs of Africa*. Seagull Books.
- Bloom, H. (1987). *Modern Critical View : Harold Pinter*. Chelsea House Publishers.
- Brecht, B. (1966). *Mother Courage and Her Children : A Chronicle of the Thirty Years' War* (E. Bentley, Trans.). Grove Press.
- Kanhailal, H. (2016). *Theatre of the Earth : The Works of Heisnam Kanhailal*. Seagull Books.
- Mee, E. B. (2008). *Theatre of Roots*. Seagull Books.
- Premchand, N. (2021). *And then, You Fly to Freedom : Essays on Postdramatic Theatre, Performance and Culture*. Reiki Nongthombam.
- Rituals & Performances : *Studies in Traditional Theatres of Manipur* (2020). Reiki Nongthombam.
- Rojio, U. (2016). *Kanhailal's Dakghar*. H. Kanhailal, *Theatre of the Earth : The Works of Heisnam Kanhailal*. Seagull Books. 166-173.
- Schechner, R. (1994). *Environmental Theater*. Applause Books.