

ABSORBING THE TEXT: EXPERIMENTAL METHODS IN HEISNAM

TOMBA'S PLAY *SAMNADRABA MAMI*

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary Indian playwrights and directors are experimenting with the themes and methods to redefine the theatre. This paper focuses on Heisnam Tomba's *Samnadraba Mami* /Disjointed Image (2009) and his experiments with language, body movements and music in the contemporary Indian theatre. The objective of the paper is to analyze the play and interpret the success of the experimental techniques. Tomba's play depicts the images of violence under the looming presence of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) in Manipur and the need for ahimsa (non-violence). The play has few dialogues but the songs, the performers' body language and emotions, transfers the message. This paper situates the play as a careful dramatic idiom that voices the story with the body, music and sound. The play in-fact is an accumulation of embodied memories from the entire north east of India. The text is absorbed by the actors and enacted. The body movements and the melancholic and melodious sounds from the actors, seems to break away from the story but acts as a subtext that embeds the story of alienation of the people of the North East. The paper tries to explore Tomba's way of dealing with grim issues of violence and displacement with the weapons of words, body movements, sounds and music. This paper will also seek to interrogate and examine if the use of these experimental methods can be instrumental in eliciting the political consciousness, helping it to achieve a sense of contemporaneity.

KEYWORDS: Contemporary Indian Drama, Experimental Techniques, Violence

INTRODUCTION

"In the dark times

Will there also be singing?

Yes, there will also be singing.

About the dark times"

Bertolt Brecht

Heisnam Tomba is a Manipuri playwright, actor and theatre director. In his plays he tries to represent the contemporary life of the people of Manipur. He practices the native form of theatre and continues his experiments to bring out a theatre different from the western models. His play *Samandraba Mami* is an example of the experiments in the post-independence Indian theatre. The text is absorbed into the body of the actors. He uses broken sentences and not full-fledged and long dialogues. The silences and gaps in between those sentences gives time to the audiences and compel them to think and introspect and not just remain mere spectators. It questions not just the system but also us as part of that

system.

In Tomba's own words, "there are no printed materials for my play *Samnadraba Mami* as it was made up with improvisation and some other techniques. It was an experiment to explore the physical and visceral response to the dominant political tensions of the time, in a localized context." Like other experimental plays, *Samnadraba Mami* is performed in a non-proscenium stage, breaking the barrier between the actor and the audience. Improvisation in contemporary theatre resulted in experimental and unique plays. It also adopts experimental methods such as the use of a (female) narrator (which is typical of the traditional Indian theatre), the use of body movements than dialogues and the use of sounds and music. The play attempts to locate in a continuum of living theatre, sensitive to the sensory, energised by the power of sound and movement.

Tomba uses non-verbal methods to convey the pain and depict the silencing terror of the north eastern states of India, especially Manipur. Veteran playwright and director Ratan Thiyam sees theater as "a sacred space where audiences and actors can think together about how to create a better society". Tomba's play provides this vision of working together towards a common goal of a peaceful state. Tomba's play portrays the images of violence under the looming presence of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) in Manipur and the need for ahimsa (non-violence). The play has few dialogues but the songs, the performers' body language and emotions, transfers the message. In his play he uses fewer words more body movements and music and overcomes the barrier of language and conveys the message to audience across the world.

Samandraba Mami is presented by 'Kalakshetra', Manipur, the theatre group of the director, H. Tomba. It is a short presentation of fifty minutes. This group was established in 1969 by Tomba's parents, Heisnam Kanhailal and his wife Heisnam Sabitri, with the main objective to study, revive and project the culture of Manipur through the art of theatre. Deeply rooted in Manipuri tradition, the group has staged the most crucial realities of oppression and resistance through their productions making the spectators alert of the time in which they are living. This is part of the group's attempt to evolve a new ideological basis for artistic, social, economic and political life, with the aim of the betterment of humanity. The production in-fact is a conglomeration of embodied memories from the entire north east of India. 'Kalakshetra' believes in the notion of a workshop that is a laboratory or research theatre rather than a production company, thus, for the last four decades, through its experiment they have been successful in developing in a continuous process of 'renewal of ancestral tradition' for a contemporary cultural expression as the progeny of an ethno-social tradition of Manipur. Kanhailal writes of his training process: "Believing in the autonomy of theatre, we swallowed the text and absorbed it into our body instead of speaking out the lines through lip movement, facial and finger gestures. We shattered the whole network of illusion on the stage. We were no longer burdened with the heavy light, costume and make-up. We cleaned the stage as an empty space where we began to unfold the autonomy of theatre". It has evolved a distinctive theatrical style, which is predominantly non-verbal. The play *Samnadraba Mami* was performed in the Bharat Rang Mahotsav in 2012. It was also performed on December 27, 2010 in the 3rd International Theatre Festival of Kerala (ITFoK), organised by the Kerala Sangeetha Nataka Akademi, Thrissur, held during December 22 – 31, 2010 at Akademi premises in Thrissur.

The play depicts various socio-politico-economic issues of Manipuri society. It deals with daily social happenings, family affairs, state administration, rampant corruption, unemployment problems, insurgency problems, complaints of the disgruntled youths etc. The performance space is very simple and natural. The female narrator, through

the melancholic actions and fearful body moments accompanied with the drum beats narrates the story of the people of Manipur. The play shows the violence in Manipur as a result of the tyranny of the armed forces and urges the people to react against violence through the Gandhian way of non-violence. The play shows the dark situation of violence and the cruelties of the soldiers. The Manipuri men are arrested without warrants, tortured, amputated and killed. Cruelties towards women are also shown in the play. Women are beaten with cane, silenced by stuffing cloth in their mouth. Their cries are suppressed by the roaring trumpets. In the end Tomba brings out three men incorporating the three wise monkeys from Japanese tradition which gives the idea "don't see, don't hear, and don't speak". This represents either the government machineries that are indifferent to the people or the plight of the people under the AFSPA.

When it comes to art, language is no barrier. The play had few dialogues but the songs, the performers' body language and emotions, and the message they convey are the main highlights. The play *Samanadraba Mami* talks about the issues faced by Manipuris and the need for ahimsa (non-violence). Hence there are two types of movements, one is slow and silent and the other is fast and violent. It is calm and peaceful in the beginning when it shows the scenic beauty of the land and its romantic life. The body movements lay down the people's weakness and lethargy under the violence. The pace of the body movements increase and are violent when the soldiers are on the stage. Their facial expression shows their sadness, anger, fear and disgust. These feelings are universal and can reach the audience without the medium of language. With the entrance of the soldiers the natives tremble in fear and are uncomfortable as someone else is invading their space. The gestures used by the soldiers indicate their unquestioned authority and power. There is no eye contact between the people and the soldiers. Their actions are anticipating the reign of violence. Tomba adopts the movements from Tang-Ta, a form of Manipuri martial art in this play. Their posture and body alignment are defensive in nature, expecting attack at any time. The actors are trained in the Tang-Ta techniques.

The play has fewer dialogues. It uses the methods of non-verbal communication through sending and receiving wordless cues between people. The songs, the performers' body language and emotions transfer the message. The sound of the drum beats, the soldier's trumpet blowing, the sound of the heavy boots of the soldiers, the roaring of the guns, the beating sounds of the canes and the wailing and crying of the women signify the terror and violence of the land. The play gives a weak tone to the voice of the people and the voice of the army men is commanding. The play also uses Manipuri and other Indian songs to say about the glorified past before the AFSPA. The songs are melancholic in tone and show the helplessness of the people. Explaining about the play, assistant director Upendra says, "We want to tell the world about our problems and show how the common man suffers because of these issues. More than the dialogues, we wanted to convey everything through music. We've used Manipuri, Bengali, Gujarati, and Assamese languages." The songs in different languages show the need for unity against the tyrannical forces. It breaks the barrier of language and helps to reach the protest to the authorities. With the use of lesser dialogues Tomba shows how the people of Manipur are silenced by the authorities. The play attempts to become a voice of the silenced people.

CONCLUSIONS

Through these experimental methods, the text is absorbed into the body of the actor and is presented to the spectator. The text thus dissolved into body movements, music and sounds gives the spectator a reality that relates him to the situation. As against the drama in colonial period, dramatic text is given less importance. Text receives life in performance. Post-independence Indian drama thus employs these experimental methods to create its own indigenous

identity different from the classic and colonial past. The text of *Samnadraba Mami* receives a sub text in performance. The experimental inclusion of music and improvisational techniques gives more magnitude to the play when it is performed.

Tomba's theatrical language stands apart from his contemporaries by his emphasis on the bodily, the rhythmic, the non-verbal, and the lyrical. Thus with the help of body movements, sounds and music, Heisnam Tomba in his play *Samnadraba Mami* (Disjointed Images) depicts the shattered life of the people of India's north east especially Manipur who are muted by the deaf laws and urges for the need for Ahimsa or the practice of non-violence in favor of the people. It acts as a sub text and conveys the message. His experiments with the help of body movements, sounds and music is successful as the play is an effective embodiment of the contemporary life of India's north eastern states and is well received by the masses. The new trends in theatrical practice embodied by these methods have been referred in their totality as the experimental techniques by the critics. In the silencing terror of violence by the army and government, Tomba's play shows that people will use art as a medium to voice the worries of sons of the land. Even in the reign of terror art can represent the worries of people. Through the experimental methods of using music and body movements, Tomba shows that even in the dark times, there will be music as people will sing about their dark times. These newer kinds of performances also reveal the zeal of liberation from all conventional structures of the theatre and society.

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