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THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF ADAPTATION IN KANHAILAL'S THEATRE

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Abstract

This paper attempts to focus on the transformative processes such as transfer and reinvention in today's world recognizing the flexibility and respect for the differences in cultural traditions. Through the analysis of Heisnam Kanhailal's plays, this paper emphasizes the significance of perspective, acknowledging the post-positivist view of knowledge that problematizes notions of 'objectivity' and 'fidelity.' It is interesting to note that theatre directors like Kanhailal challenged Western concepts of translation and adaptation to assert his political point. Specific to its cultural milieu, the paper examines some of Kanhailal's plays in detail – adaptation, assertion and awakening. In this paper, I discuss how Kanhailal adapts the physical culture of Manipur in his theatre and then closely reading some of his plays.

The study on translation and adaptation has substantiated that the two terms have many contextual meanings. In a specific cultural and literary context, adaptation reflects the change of medium enabling a meaningful public sphere. In a wider social context, the term signifies several meanings and a wide range of possibilities. In his significant essay "The Task of the Translator," Walter Benjamin (1923) observes translation as a strategy that enables texts to survive and adapt to a new cultural milieu. While many scholars have different interpretations and disagreements on this essay, the history of the essay's reception performs as the best specimen for Benjamin's thesis about the adaptive power of translation. It is important to remember what Susan Basnett asserts in the 1990s, "Much time and ink has been wasted attempting to differentiate between translations, versions, adaptations and the establishment of a hierarchy of 'correctness'" (Basnett 1991: 78). She further asserts, "all texts are translations of translations of translations" (ibid: 79).

With the emergence of adaptation studies, critic Mark O' Thomas has challenged Basnett's views. He argues adaptations differ from translations in the sense that they "take place across media rather than cultures – literature into film, diary extract into a stage play, etc." (O' Thomas 2010: 48). While many translation studies scholars were sceptical on such developments, a scholar Van Gorp views that with the emergence of Romantic hermeneutics during the nineteenth century, the concept of adaptation has "gradually acquired more negative connotations" (Van Gorp 2004: 66), when compared to translation. It is assumed that translation creates the 'ideal image' of the source text, an adaptation potentially subvert that image (ibid: 66). For many years adaptation studies has been subsumed as a subaltern discipline of translation studies.

Interestingly, the translation studies scholar John Milton (2006) asserts that translation and adaptation are fundamentally different, yet

interrelated processes. Later, Milton endorses adaptation studies' subaltern status, as he recommends that it should draw upon translation studies' theoretical insights – for instance, André Lefevere's concept of 'refraction', as a way of understanding the many ways in which a source text is transformed into 'translations, summaries [and] critiques' (Milton 2009: 58). While acknowledging the ongoing debate on translation and adaptation, this paper attempts to focus on the transformative processes such as transfer and reinvention in today's world recognizing the flexibility and respect for the differences in cultural traditions. Through the analysis of Heisnam Kanhailal's¹ plays, this paper emphasizes the significance of perspective, acknowledging the post-positivist view of knowledge that problematizes notions of 'objectivity' and 'fidelity.' It is interesting to note that theatre directors like Kanhailal challenged Western concepts of translation and adaptation to assert his political point. Specific to its cultural milieu, the paper examines some of Kanhailal's plays in detail – adaptation, assertion and awakening. In this paper, I discuss how Kanhailal adapts the physical culture of Manipur in his theatre and then closely reading some of his plays.

A Reinvention of Psychophysical Elements

Kanhailal does not advertise his ethnicity through the creation of exotic spectacles in the tradition of 'theatre of roots'. Instead, Kanhailal asserts his culture differently without commodifying folk and rural performance traditions. At this point, it would be useful to examine how Kanhailal's theatre has emerged from the cultural resources of his world. Significantly, the instinctive and almost dreamlike quality of his acting method and training (Bharucha 1992: 21) are outcomes of those organic

principles of life so perceptible in the performative traditions of Manipur. The actions and gestures of his theatre are mainly shaped by the rhythms of a predominantly agricultural society.

Moreover, there is a strong emphasis placed on *noiba* (movement), a concept predominant in Lai Haraoba² and other traditional performances in his theatre training and rehearsal process.³ Apart from these daily rituals, which have entered the training process of his actors, Kanhailal stresses the fluidity of movement and a sense of continuity. He suggests that just as a ripple of waves continues, movements can never stop. Even when they are broken, the inner pulse of movement continues.⁴ Given such a pre-performative assumption, it is not surprising that Kanhailal's actors display organic movements and gestures in their performance.

The training of Kanhailal's actors has emerged to a large degree from the physical culture of Manipur. As it is perceptible in his theatre practice, Kanhailal acknowledges:

Taking the premise of the psycho-physical exercises we learnt from Badal Sircar, we have continued to evolve new exercises – physical, vocal and mental. As renowned authorities in their respective disciplines, we are bound to acknowledge the guidance of Guru Gourakishore Sharma and Guru Ebotombi Singh (Thang-ta); Ema Yumshang Maibi, Guru Achoubisana and Pundit Kulachandra (Maibi ritual performance and Lai Haraoba); Oja Achou and Oja Manglem (Moirang Parva – folk operatic theatre); Prof. Nilakanta (Manipuri art and culture); Oja K. C. Tensuba (Vipassana meditation); as well as other scholars and practitioners who have

¹ Heisnam Kanhailal (1941-2016) is a renowned playwright, theatre director from Manipur, India. Recognising his unique contribution to Indian Theatre, he was honoured with Padmabhusan, Padmashree, Sangeet Natak Academy Award and many others.

² Lai Haraoba (meaning 'Rejoicing with the gods') is a ritual festival of Manipur.

³ I was closely associated with Heisnam Kanhailal for almost eight years (2008-2016). During this time, I

had come across Kanhailal using the word *noiba* in daily practice and rehearsal. By *noiba*, he meant to suggest an animated subtle body movement or the fluidity of movement like the ripple of waves.

⁴ In most of Kanhailal's actor's exercises of rhythm, movement and voice, I have noticed that the exercises do not end abruptly, but slow down till it continues to get absorbed inside the body. He always recommended, to use his phrase, "take it inside the body" (*hakchang manungda pusillo*).

allowed us to interact and communicate with them, over the years.

(Kanhailal 2016: 37)

Apart from learning all these traditional arts, the everyday physical disciplines of the practitioners also contribute to the theatre of Kanhailal. This extends to the body decorum that is to be found in the codes and rituals of everyday life. For instance, it is common that younger people prostrate themselves in front of their elders thereby demonstrating respect for social hierarchy through such gestures. Prostration is also a spiritual discipline in Meetei tradition. The act has often traditionally been an important part of civil, religious and traditional rituals and ceremonies. One can see three major forms of prostration in Meetei society – full prostration, half prostration and slight bend.

In the full prostration, the whole body is stretched out on the ground. The spinal column and breathing play an important role in stretching out the body. In this prostration, the descending and ascending movements of the body are almost like a wave flowing. In the half prostration, the knee kneels and the upper part of the body above the knee prostrates with the hands touching the ground. This is a common practice in the daily ritual worship at home, once early morning and once in the evening. The last type of prostration in which the body slightly bends and walks is a common practice in any social gathering of the Meeteis. One can observe that the walking in this posture is automatically rhythmic. Kanhailal extensively uses this walking style creatively in many of his plays – for instance, in the three *Ojha* (teachers) walking rhythmically in *Tamnalai* and the three soldiers walking in the play *Draupadi* in the ‘combing operation’⁵ scene. These can be regarded as reinventions or physical elaborations of a traditional walking style.

In many of his psycho-physical training exercises, Kanhailal focused on an awareness of different body weights – for instance, the heaviness and lightness of the body while walking. One of its

richest manifestations is to be found in the martial arts tradition of Thang-ta, which has served as a source of inspiration for many of Kanhailal's exercises. Kanhailal always advised his actors, “Try to see with your ears. Try to hear with your eyes”. This central principle of Thang-ta has inspired Kanhailal's actors to develop ‘simultaneity of perceptions’ (Bharucha 1992: 25) and to focus on acquiring total balance and developing the fullest awareness of one's reflexes.

In a different context of the South Indian martial art of *kalarippayattu*, Phillip Zarilli uses the phrase “when the body becomes all eyes” to signify the state of mind/being of the martial practitioner at the moment he wields his sword to kill (Zarilli 1998: 201). Zarilli asserts that the existential moment of striking the sword is the moment when the practitioner should “ideally be ‘doubtless,’ have mental courage, possess ‘mental power’ and thus attain a state of transformative fury” (ibid.: 201-2). While this is what the martial artists aspire to as they practice to transform themselves to attain a certain state, Kanhailal stresses the importance of ‘perceptions’ in actors. This also comes through in the concept of *nung pan phaonaba* (which literally means the communication between inner and outer) – the organic flow of energy between the outer and inner self of the body – which Kanhailal constantly used to call attention to in his interaction with actors during the pre-performative exercises.

To understand some psycho-physical aspects of Kanhailal, let us examine the play *Memoirs of Africa* (first production 1985). In the first scene of the play, *Mee* (literally means “human”, as enacted by Sabitri) is “crouched on the floor centre-stage like a seed, waiting to flower” (Bharucha 1992: 80). The two Nupi (women) enter with flowing and sensuous movements with sliding motions of their feet and slight sway of their hips. With their hands flowing, they sing “*he ui iiiii iiiii / he ui i i i i i / he ee u iiiii ii i.*” On the first syllable of the song – *he* – the Nupi jerk their shoulders to accentuate the rhythm. On the last vibrations of the song, they draw their hands to the navel. This first episode of the play has many

⁵ Combing operation or combined operation is a joint operation done by allies of paramilitary force

for cleansing an area. It is understood as low-intensity warfare.

psycho-physical elements borrowed from the Lai Haraoba traditions. Firstly, the song is sung in a style inspired by the *thawai mi kouba*, which is a chant sung by the *amaibas* (priests) during Lai Haraoba rituals and other occasions. The *amaibas* pulsate with sound energies that attempt to call back the soul, and thereby restore order and peace in a person's being.

Aesthetically, the song carries hypnotic powers of mimesis associated with various myths in the Meetei worldview. To reiterate, the Meeteis believe in the 'multiplicity of souls.' Besides the five souls formed by the five basic elements (ether, wind, water, earth and fire), they include a sixth one in the form of *mi* (shadow/reflection). Among the Meeteis, *mi* is regarded as the most loyal companion of a person mostly because it never deserts the body until death. So an *amaiba* performs *thawai mi kouba* (to invoke *thawai* [soul] not to leave the body) on various occasions – for instance – after the birth of a baby, on the spot of an accident, when a person is ill, bad dreams, etc. When an *amaiba* performs the *thawai mi kouba* ritual, he prays for the five souls and the *mi* to take its proper place inside the body. In a different mode, this ritual is used in Kanhailal's adaptation of Tagore's *Dakghar* to reawaken the spirit of Amal in the play.

Returning to the opening sequence of *Memoirs of Africa*, it should be pointed out that an important element in rendering this song is the jerk of the shoulders of the Nupi on the first syllable of the song. This jerk is inspired by the Meetei concept of *ehool* that can be translated as 'heartbeat' or 'impulse'; it appears to mimic the jerk of the *penakhongba's* (*pena* player) shoulders while playing *pena*. *Ehool* contains both a beat and an added off-beat. In rhythmic terms, it is akin to the sound of a beating heart. This can be counted as, 'One-and-two,' or as 'One-two-three and four.' In metaphoric terms, it can be interpreted as a 'moment of release.' When a water droplet falls from the tip of a wet leaf, it falls the same way as the impulse of *ehool*. The use of *ehool* in producing sounds can also be observed in Sabitri's cries of 'te ... tu' in the play *Pebet* and 'ma...ho' in *Draupadi*. In Kanhailal's acting technique, the principles of *ehool* are integral in the execution of body movement and

the use of sound from different resonators of the body.

Let me share one of the stories in the process of making the play *Tamnalai* (first production 1972), Kanhailal's first experimental production. The play is set in the 1960s in Manipur. Those were the days when thugs dreaded by everyone used to haunt the streets. Chandrakangnan, an ambitious student, is a son of a poor widow, who is good at studies. He has been a silent victim of the constant pestering of the thugs. On the other hand, Ngangbiton, daughter of a well-off family pines for him, much to his chagrin. In this milieu, Chandrakangnan's mother tries her best to keep him off from any kind of distractions. But Chandrakangnan, one day gives in to his pent up angst and murders the thugs. The widowed mother and his teachers lament on such an ill-fated end. In the process of making the play, it was the dawn of the Gang-ngai festival of Kabui tribe that Kanhailal woke up and asked Sabitri to listen to the ritual of *lamlenlu* early morning. Sabitri was breastfeeding one of her children. Kanhailal told her to listen to the vibrative sound of the ritual as well as the sound of a dog crying. He asked Sabitri to blend the two sounds to create the last haunting lamentation of the play *Tamnalai*. Sabitri created an extraordinarily haunting sound for the last scene of the play. The soundscape that Sabitri created becomes a dramaturgical tool for alerting the 'political haunt' of the time. After watching the play the celebrated Manipuri poet Laishram Samarendra responded with this delightful poem:

Three Old Men

Laishram Samarendra

Three old men, one nightfall
arrive all of a sudden
at the widow's abode,
"How does the incident happen?
What a well-behaved boy he was?
Darkness envisages."
The local goons, the haunting spirit
snaffle the widow's son
untimely raze
the widow's son Chandrakangnan,
Grief engulfs the three old men
On the edge of the stage,

In the middle of the stage,
In front of the stage,
In every nook and corner of the stage,
On the side of the stage,
Grief swallowed up,
the mythical God-liked,
the three old men.
Flying far and wide in the dark night
the haunting spirits ran away.
The three old men
holding sticks chased them,
when I was alone
on the top, on the ceiling of the house
in the cloud of the dark night
among the white clouds.

(Translation mine)

We have, thus, observed that Kanhailal adapts psycho-physical elements from various performance traditions to create different dramaturgies. He has perfected over the years a non-verbal dramaturgy to assert his concepts and political ideas.

Significantly, Kanhailal-Sabitri's pre-expressive principles in his actor-training process are predominantly derived from the physical culture and performance tradition of Manipur. Kanhailal works in his own physical culture to create his theatre idioms. However, one must also acknowledge that Kanhailal, unlike Ratan Thiyam, never duplicates the movement pattern from Lai Haraoba, *natasankirtana* or *thang-ta*. Rather, he transforms these patterns into his physical language creating a new dramaturgy. Kanhailal (2016: 29) himself has asserted, "We do not become blind and romantic when exposed to the exotic and spectacular forms of our tradition. Instead, we become conscious of the continuity of tradition which lies in its spirit and not in its form." This statement can be regarded as an appropriate testimony of his aesthetics and performance practice.

Kanhailal's *Dakhgar*: Transforming the Body

Principally, I would read the performance text of Heisnam Kanhailal's *Dakhgar*, not as the one who is familiar with the literary text of Rabindranath Tagore, but as someone brought up from a different milieu of Bengali's linguistic and textual culture. As

Barthes (1972: 109) himself said, "Everything can be a myth provided it is conveyed by a discourse." Throughout the play, perhaps, the protagonist Amal, an eight years old boy (played by Heisnam Sabitri) is inviting viewers to share rather than merely observe what he/she was feeling, and as a consequence, encouraging viewers to be sympathetic. This is again made possible by the powerful use of rustic as well as meditative music in the play composed by Heisnam Tomba. Sabitri refreshes the field of cultural studies and modernism because her performance is the axis of so many media (acting, gestures, dance, singing, screaming, etc.), which of course create multiple myths. The success of her art depends wholly upon such confluence. Discourse analysis has served to remind us that reading is not confined to the letter or the field of letters.

Sabitri's act generates an intra-semiotic communication, which shifts into an extra-semiotic communication, or, I could say, into an inter-semiotic communication. She plays a wonderful game of turn-taking, the interplay of emotions, in her act. When this interplay is soaked up, it seems that we are also actors of such interplay of feelings and emotions caught up in the political turmoil of Manipur. The development of the performance to give a lasting impact through the act of Sabitri and other actors creates several myths whereby the literary poetic mysticism of Tagore's *Dakhgar* is transcended into another form of poetic mysticism through the physical performance. Sabitri's artistry skills are understood differently in different contexts, so the play articulates different ideas and myths about the relationship between theatre and the body, between the actors and the spectators, between the performance space and the lived world.

On the other hand, the actor's body is a site of power, the power achieved through rigorous training, and a site where power can be questioned and explored generating a discursive discourse as well as the myths associated with the worldview of the lived world. The actor's body, on the other hand, is an embodied reality interpreted differently in different cultural contexts with its own social and psychological significance. This is not to rule out any existence of what Jurgen Habermas (1991: 1) calls

"universal pragmatics" even if he ignores non-verbalized actions and bodily expressions. Sabitri's eminence that her years of a successful career as an actor have brought her into the theatre and performance fraternity, is a case in point that her bodily expressions are a successful journey in passing on her powerful opinion. Her celebrity status confers a degree of power that enables her to regard her body as different from the body of a young and aspiring actor. And yet this celebrity-ness also makes the spectators' curious gaze fall on her bodily difference. The "body culture" that Sabitri acquired is obtained from her earlier training in Manipuri performing arts. Thus, every actor acquires a "body culture" which can be described as all the ways that an individual conceptualizes and experiences as his or her own body, whether consciously or otherwise.

The actor's body can also be used as an analytical strategy or vantage point. The relationships between performance and culture can tell us much about both (See Conroy 2010: 5). Culture provides us with the background of these relationships and that of acquiring the body image. The body can be an instrument of various effective ends — political, social, religious and ritual. In the same vein, a social body is mainly represented in the female body (not to rule out the polemics of body politics) whose well-being reflects social health and whose violation causes severe anxiety in the collectivity. This is precisely why the theatrical nude protest in *Draupadi* (2000) and later in the real life in front of the Kangla on the 15th of July 2004 by a dozen Manipuri women provoked an unparalleled response from various spectators. But in *Dakhgar* the body politics is different; Sabitri, a 60-year old female actor brilliantly captures the restlessness and despondency of a young child.

Another important aspect of the play is the semiotics of silence that Kanhailal draws on in the play. For instance, the scene of the silence of Sabitri, closing her eyes, at the end of the play provokes many of the audiences with different feelings and aesthetics mimesis. Silence in the play has also

become a language where the pragmatics of silence itself is a myth. Taking from Eugenio Barba, Kanhailal calls the silence of an actor "immobile mobility." He argues that a silent actor is not literally silent but there is mobility within the self. In the process of this mobility, he further explains, the actor creates a "personal myth."⁶

Reading Kanhailal's Performance Text of *Draupadi*

The performance of Heisnam Sabitri in the play *Draupadi* (2000) by Heisnam Kanhailal, a play based on the story of the same name by Mahasweta Devi, attempts at representing the inscription of violence of Armed Forces on the female/maternal body, given the political milieu of Manipur. In her preface to the translation of the short story, Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak (1981) writes,

The men easily succeed in stripping Dopdi — in the narrative, it is the culmination of her political punishment by the representatives of the law. She remains publicly naked at her insistence. Rather than save her modesty through the implicit intervention of a benign and divine (in this case it would have been godlike) comrade, the story insists that this is the place where male leadership stops.

In the play *Draupadi*, the first narrative depicts the cold-blooded murder of Dopdi's husband Dulna. Kanhailal gives a very poignant description of the journey of Dulna and Dopdi. In such a context, the character of "Dopdi" as the real witness of violent history now turned into its other (because of her insanity) represents the "unrepresentable" both in the sense of an impossibility of "being" as well as of a distorted and victimized *effect* of not having the "being." The "violated" being of Dopdi acts as a signifier of victimhood. The question is: Can the violated signifier signify its usual historical, objective and cultural reference, or imply an impossibility of representation of its ordinary suffering of violence? The intense physical imagery in the play also represents a challenge to the self/other opposition,

⁶ This is told during my interview with Heisnam Kanhailal on 16th November 2010 at Hotel Janpath, New Delhi.

undermining traditional ideas of rationality and individuality.

In his narrative of brutal violence on the human body, particularly that of the female, Kanhailal in most of his plays constantly treads the borderline between the human and animal existence. Madness as a source of destruction of human sanity and as an infliction on the *self* has been understood by many as an inseparable aspect of a collective madness accompanying violence. Under such a partitioning of the self and the reversal of human and animal values, one wonders as to what would be the status of reason or rationality, "right" and "wrong," "moral" and "immoral," "sane" and "insane."

Let me quote extensively the climactic scene of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1981) translation of the short story 'Draupadi':

Draupadi's black body comes even closer. Draupadi shakes with a burst of indomitable laughter that Senanayak simply cannot understand. Her ravaged lips bleed as she begins laughing. Draupadi wipes the blood on her palm and says in a voice that is as terrifying sky splitting, and sharp as her ululation, "What's the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man?"

She looks around and chooses the front of Senanayak's white bush shirt to spit a bloody gob at and says, "There isn't a man here that I should be ashamed. I will not let you put my cloth on me. What more can you do? Come on, counter me--come on, counter me-?"

Draupadi pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts, and for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid.

Apart from the psycho-physical aspects of acting and cultural sensibilities working in the performance text of Kanhailal, which makes it different from Mahasweta Devi's original text, one can also attempt to read Kanhailal's *Draupadi* with the cultural semiotics embedded in the performance. In the last scene of Kanhailal's *Draupadi*, Draupadi

(Sabitri) gobs at Senanayak. Instantaneously in reaction, Senanayak raises his hand to slap her. But he couldn't. He was rather terrified. It could be noted that while Sabitri (Draupadi) spitefully groans and yells, "I will not let you cloth me. Come closer, counter me" (*Eigi eefi nakhoibu sethalloi/changsallak-o lao/ eibu counter touro lao hei*), paradoxically she herself was covered with a piece of cloth. This piece of cloth symbolically and visually becomes a *phanek*. If we observe the play closely, this piece of cloth is not the same Santhal *saree* worn by Sabitri throughout the play, but the one provided to her by a *sepoy* when she resists putting on her own *saree*. The use of this cloth, which is shorter in length, akin to a *phanek* (a sarong worn by Meetei women), gives a cultural tinge to the play. Being a Meetei woman, Sabitri can play comfortably with this smaller piece of cloth, which symbolically becomes a *phanek*. In a swift moment, Sabitri disrobing herself and covering Senanayak with the *phanek* could be read as being hurled by the *phanek* (*phanek na kanba*) – an ultimate act of humiliation and emasculation of men that is brilliantly translated into action by A. Upendro (Senanayak). This swift act of hurling the man with the *phanek* could be read as an act of shaming the masculine Army man. In this context, Sabitri's act renders both the rebellious as well as emasculating power, given the cultural milieu of Manipur.

Reclaiming *Karna*: Energizing the Community

Another play of Kanhailal that is important to discuss is the play, *Karna*. While many theatre productions in India on the *Karna* theme in different ways latched on to the text of *Karnabharam* by Bhasa (Ratan Thiyam, K.N. Panicker, Chandradasan, Nayiri, etc.), Kanhailal takes only the skeleton of the storyline of *Karna*, then reimagines and contextualizes it by fleshing it out in a refreshingly innovative manner. Kanhailal's *Karna* was premiered on 6th February 1997, in a community *mandap* at Nityainand Mandap in Imphal. In an interview with Kanhailal, he expressed the need for theatre to create a community audience (Bandhopadhyay 1997: 76). He chose *mandap* as a performance space precisely to connect with the community as well as create a community experience. In this case the experience of suffering. Because of the strong

historical tradition of *mandap leela* in Manipur, it had already established cultural and social dimensions.

Kanhailal's version of Karna shifts the emphasis from Karna's relationship with his biological mother to his relationship with his foster mother Radha, played by legendary actor Heisnam Sabitri. Her son Heisnam Tomba played the role of Karna. The first part of the play dramatizes poignantly and elaborately how Radha teaches Karna the toddler to stand up on his feet and walk bit by bit with the rhythmic *heina-heina* movement. It is the act of a child being taught to stand up, use his limbs and gradually understand his body and self. Serving as a prologue to the play, through a stunning body movement Kanhailal depicted the bringing up of Karna, son of Kunti and the Sun, by Radha the shudrani, with an act of love and humility.

After he grows up into manhood, he practices the skills of the archer and the warrior of the community. In a brief, yet powerful soliloquy, Karna recounts the humiliation he suffered throughout his life. His pain, agony and anxiety are poignantly portrayed through the soliloquy; theatrically dramatize through the trance movement of Karna and then seamlessly continue to practice archery. After the soliloquy, his coming of age is celebrated with a ritual of his bathing and anointment, an event in which all the members of the community participate with great enthusiasm. None of these events as part of the earlier representation of Karna's story, which normally underscores his relationship with Pandavas and Kauravas, both of whom constitutes the ruling class. The fact remains though Karna had Kshatriya origins; his Kshatriya mother had abandoned him at birth. Though the Kaurava king honours him with power and position, it is only because of his valour or use-value. Earlier, Karna narratives were fixated on his Kshatriya links and completely ignore what he meant to the community of shudras who brought him up. The production by Nayiri and Chandradasan dramatize and hint respectively at his identity crisis. In Kanhailal's imagination, it is not a crisis of identity or an ambivalent sense of belonging. The Kshatriya's claim to Karna is a naked act of oppression and

appropriation. This was poignantly expressed in Kanhailal's *Karna*.

In the brief battle scene that follows, Karna goes down fighting. The community *mandap* becomes a site of community lamentation of the shudras as well as that of the audience. It is then disrupted by the uncouth and violent entry of Kunti and the Pandavas to claim his dead body. Then follows a dispute as to who should perform his funeral rites: those who raised him or those who abandoned and appropriated him. The fight ensues, and Kshatriyas win and take away Karna's body drowning the community of shudras particularly his foster mother Radha in great agony. Sabitri's cry '*munbikhre munbikhre eethanungdagi munbikhre*' (they snatched away (my son) from my bosom) in the play not only heightened the tragic lamentation but also has social energy which has a larger collective dimension, given the socio-political turmoil in the 1990s of Manipur. A maibi-like character in trance pronounces repeatedly *munbikhre* (snatched away) with the villagers in unison. In the 1990s when young boys were 'snatched away' by army personals and insurgency groups from parents, the repeated mantra *munbikhre* (snatched away) is loaded with socio-political meanings. Radha cries, "don't you hear my son, the whole community lamenting." Forcibly snatching away the body of Karna is a merciless act of ripping off the pride of shudras. In between a royal announcement came that no Shudra can lament the death of a Kshatriya hero.

Subsequently, the lamentation moves on to a different level when Karna's foster-father Adhiratha shuts the doors and transforms the performing space *mandap* into a conspiratorial private space for shudras. Adhiratha charges Karna as a traitor who sold out to the power and security of the Kshatriyas and declares that one need not lament for him. Radha disagrees and firmly proclaims that Karna stands for shudras till the end of his life. He fought against the humiliation, pain and agony for the shudras. However, a villager asserts that he is no more with us and there is no point lamenting on. He chants '*kaorasi Karna*' (Let us forget Karna), and then the whole villagers follow the chanting. The repeated chanting of '*kaorasi Karna*' in a mournful

tone takes the emotion of the play to a different plane. But it is to the aggrieved mother Radha to call on the spirit of Karna to plead his case.

Kanhailal's ingenuity lies in this unexpected twist to the narrative of invoking Karna's spirit, which Samik Bandhopadhyay claims as "the first-ever dramatic questioning of the myth in its making (Bandhopadhyay 1997: 75)." However, this is claiming too much. There have been several questionings of Mahabharata characters including Karna in different versions of the narrative in our folk tribal and bhakti traditions in different languages and cultures of India. Still the fact remains that the twist in Kanhailal's *Karna* is a great breakthrough in the context of modern Indian theatre. In the play, Karna's spirit charges the author Vyasa (he could have as well charged the other directors of *Karnabharam* as well for the same reason), creator of the text, with denying him the freedom to make his choice of belonging to shudras. It was well within the will of the author and the social system he was set. Any historical way of identifying his suffering with his people was denied. Karna's spirit asserts, "If I were born in a real historical time, I will overtly show my pain, agony and anger. I will sacrifice my body and soul for the downtrodden and the oppressed, O mother!" The play ends with Radha's cry, "That is my real son. O' mother's Karna!" The whole community is then spiritually energized. Thus the story of Karna becomes a rite of passage both for the protagonist, his community and the audience. Though in the dispute over Karna's body Khsatriyas win the day, Karna's spirit asserts his rediscovered identity with the community that nurtured him.

The identity politics of earlier productions and the body politics suggested in Kanhailal's production are both transcended in the rite of passage when everybody dies and is reborn into a new awakening. It is to this that Kanhailal referred to as the "awakening of senses" (2016) through theatre experience, thereby energizing the community.

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He has dramatized and co-directed (with Dr Anuradha Ghosh) the short story *Tota Kahini* (based on the same story by Rabindranath Tagore) for the 2nd Pak-Indo Drama Festival at Government College University, Lahore, Pakistan in 2008. He took a major role in the production of Henrik Ibsen's *Lady from the Sea* representing Jawaharlal Nehru University for the University Ibsen Theatre Festival in New Delhi, 2012, sponsored by the Norwegian Embassy.

Bionote

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