CHAPTER II

IMAGERY AND REPRESENTATION IN THE AGE OF WRITTEN TEXTS
The dialogue between Shumang Lila and the social dynamics in various historical epochs, which was described in the previous chapter, is further developed in this chapter. The immediate context in the cultural practices and performances in the social milieu has also been documented. However, theatrical performances and networks even go beyond the given codes and conventions which are emphasized in the lived experiences of the people of a community. So, the theatrical world is both within and beyond the whole framework of cultural, ideological, ethical and epistemological principles of the society. This is because it exists both in real and fictive worlds.

The ‘interface between literature and history’ has been reiterated by Romila Thapar in her study of the changing representation, over historical time, of the character Sakuntala in both the narrative present in the Mahabharata, and in Kalidasa’s play Abhijnana-sakuntala. In this case, there is changing facets of a single narrative vis-à-vis the social context, which is also valid in my present study when such mythological and historical plays as Moirang Parba has been rendered in various ways. What is also important in the present study is the presence of such ‘interface’ between the contemporary social context and the plays which came up time to time, irrespective of their durability through popular demand. In the years of strong colonial and feudal assertions, Shumang Lila reacted, represented and dialogued with the situations. However, the era, which this chapter is dealing with, is a different era, the ‘postcolonial’, ‘post-feudal/monarchical’, and democratic era, which needs a different treatment from Shumang Lila also.

When I used the terms postcolonial, post-feudal, and post-monarchical, I am using them with qualifications. In the administrative sense the terms may communicate their formal meanings. However, there have been many pointers to these terms, especially the post-colonial. This was necessitated, from the understanding of some of the scholars from Northeast India in particular and from the marginal flanks of Indian social and political system. It is an emerging understanding that there is still a considerable remnant of coloniality or new form of coloniality, which is executed in the peripheries of India, both geographical and social. Same can be said of post-monarchical and post-feudal, at least in case of Manipur where monarchy has been formally substituted by the democratic political

system. Nevertheless the place of king, although symbolic and tutelary in nature, is still recognized in the religious, ritualistic, cultural and social domains.

Postcolonial study has its own history after the process of decolonization, which started in 1950s. However the term was given more significance in 1980s by Edward Said with his celebrated book *Orientalism*. When the prefix ‘post-’ is added to a root term, the resulting term ‘defer to, but differ from, the term it qualifies. So, “Postcolonial” derives its meaning from a complex relation to “colonial” which in turn derives its significance from the sense of “colony” as a territory annexed or controlled for settlement or profit. However in order to be ‘post’, the term or the discourse or experiential process has to establish its own niche and critique the previous phenomenon. So, ‘postcolonial’ cannot come into existence without really critiquing the colonialism. Most of the time, such analyses come from the insiders of the former colonies. Aime Cesaire (Discourse on Colonialism, 1950), Frantz Fanon (Black Skin, White Masks, 1952), Octave Mannoni (Prospera and Caliban, 1956), and Albert Memmi (The Colonizer and the Colonized, 1957) are some of the relatively early scholars who worked on the creation of this new paradigm.

Fanon’s scholarship delved into the racial environment where the black and white populations constantly exchange their perceptions of each other in colonial era. He captures the effects of colonialism on the ‘colonized culture’ as,

a continued agony rather than a total disappearance of the pre-existing culture. The culture once living and open to the future, becomes closed, fixed in the colonial status, caught in the yolk of oppression. Both present and mummified, it testifies against its members....The cultural mummification leads to a mummification of individual thinking....As though it were possible for a man to evolve otherwise than within the framework of a culture that recognises him and that he decides to assume.

---

356 Ibid.
Critical engagement with this creation of images of the ‘other’ is expanded further
Said. For him categories of ‘Orient’ and ‘Occident’ are ‘man-made. Therefore as much as
the West itself, the Orient is an idea that has a history and tradition of thought, imagery,
and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West.\textsuperscript{358} The debate
on colonialism in the postcolonial study is given further strength by Homi Bhabha. For him
the colonial discourse is in constant engagement with the stereotyping of identity of the
colonized people.\textsuperscript{359} The images, which were created during colonial times, are not easily
dismantled in the postcolonial era. They in fact remain as legacy, which are dissolved in
the lived experiences of the people who are by now politically decolonized.\textsuperscript{360}

The formally decolonized regimes may also turn out to be a subtle ‘colonizing’
agent towards a people in the margins. This is a case of counter-narrative becoming a
grand narrative, which is a target for many dissenting narratives from within. This is also
where the narratives of Northeast India in general and Manipur in particular are counter to
the grand narrative of India.

In case of Manipur, the legacy of imperialism, in social and cultural fields, was
both British and Hindu. As discerned in the Prologue and Chapter 1, Hindu cultural
influence was consolidated during the imperialist era. However, the historical shift of the
political set up of Manipur after independence and her merger with India coincided with
the change in the genres within Shumang Lila. This era was a new era when Manipuris
experienced a ‘new world’ after World War II. Manipur was then exposed to different
people, different struggles and new economic opportunities in terms of war contracts etc.
In terms of theatrical development in Shumang Lila this phase can be termed as drama era,
as described by Richard Schechner.\textsuperscript{361} It started in 1950 with the introduction of
scriptwriting. Before this, the Shumang Lila plays were not written in a well-established
structure but the leader of the troupe would dictate the dialogues and the members learned
them by heart. Moreover there were mainly comic plays, which did not have constant plot
and story lines but were just made up and improvised, even on the spot, to entertain the
audience. Though the previous era laid the foundation for social satire, the present era

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{359} Homi Bhabha. op. cit. p. 388.
\textsuperscript{360} Rajeev S. Patke. op. cit. p. 370.
\textsuperscript{361} See Chapter I.
\end{footnotesize}
consolidated it in different ways. In addition to this, the starting decades of this era also saw many historical and mythological plays. This era ushered in plays, which did not depend on the comic heroes typical of the previous era. Comic characters were not exaggerated but put at par with any other characters in the play. There started plays even without these comic figures. But this era did not completely snap the continuity with the previous era and there came up plays, time to time, which had comic interlude on the lines of *Thengu lila* etc.

This chapter will further carry forward the engagement with the analysis of the select texts of the plays, accumulated through interview and textual materials. At the same time, it will also reflect on the trends in the theatrical development, the process of cultural production and consumption. This presumes that Shumang Lila, which is a popular form of theatre, is also a form of mass communication.

As discerned in Chapter I, the sociological engagement of the cultural performances in general and theatre in particular can take into account four main areas, originally outlined by P. F. Lazarfeld in 1947. In this chapter also I will employ, as part of content analysis, five dimensions of plays as delineated by Goodlad: (a) themes; (b) play types; (c) goals and motives of characters in plays; (d) the setting in which the play takes place; (e) ending.\(^\text{362}\)

This analytical prelude will serve, generally, as a framework to discern phases of Shumang Lila’s development in this drama era. This era, which started in 1950, will be studied by breaking it up into three phases, based on the dominant themes. This does not discount the fact that the subsequent phases still maintain continuity with the preceding ones. The first phase is between the 1950s and the 1960s. During this time, documentary type plays predominate. They were historical, mythological plays, and comedies and tragi-comedies, where the morality, religious and social themes were dominant. The second phase may be between 1970s and 1990s. This phase is also one when there is advent of changes in the field of performance itself with the introduction of play back singing and raised stage. This phase, though it still is not away from the all time relevant theme of morality and family values, marks the upsurge of more political plays due to the existential anxieties in Manipur’s political atmosphere. This phase also is registered for its increasing

commercialization of the cultural products. The third phase is from the late 1990s up to this decade of the twenty-first century when there is representation of themes adhering to the changing modes of political reactions by the people; sexuality; inter-cultural dialogue; and commerce.

1. First Phase: A Reluctant Modernity

The literate tradition in Shumang Lila started with the first scripted play in 1950, *Puya/Puran Meithaba* (burning of the Puya of N. Angouton followed by the play *B.A. Mapa Lamboiba* (renunciation of the world by the father of a B.A.), written and directed by Nongmaiying Sharma. This opened up a new horizon for the creative writers to experiment and advance the dramatic literature. This time was also a political turning point in the history of Manipur when she was merged into India under the controversial ‘Merger Agreement’ of 21 September 1949. This new era of literate tradition in Shumang Lila also coincided with a new step into ‘modernity’ with various qualifications in Manipur. In the culture of historical recording written forms are granted a more reliable source than archeological and oral renditions. The reason being ‘the superior ability of writing to survive in its physical manifestation and to be passed on from epoch to epoch, either as non-narrative artifacts such as account books, bureaucratic registers of such events as births, ... or as narrative artifacts such as contemporary histories... and even avowedly semi-fictional accounts such as myths or ballads.*364 On the other hand ‘oral discourse relies on the faithfulness of its transmitters and receivers, neither of which can be perfect as a means of recording events’. However, written records also suffer from selection and omission of representation, which means there cannot be a complete and reliable picture of events when there is involvement of the ideological frame of the persons who do this job.

The question remains: Does the advent of writing serve as a cultural change in a society? The answer may be both in affirmative and negative. It is affirmative when writing becomes a community phenomenon. It may not be so when writing is confined to a few for their own private affairs. This is evident from the history of writing itself. However, writing a history of writing itself is a difficult task, especially when there is paucity of evidence. Conjecture may be used as a tool for this task. According to Steve

---

363 *Puyas* are the indigenous books of knowledge, mainly religious scriptures.
Clark, 'the origin of writing can only be left to myth. It will be not the object of science but only of a history, which is recited, a fable that is repeated. There is no alternative but to accept the condition of original separation: “the writing of beginnings presupposes itself as already existing in order to think of itself at its birth”.'\textsuperscript{365} However, this problem may be narrowed if we approach it ‘anthropologically’ which means from ‘the Sumerians onwards (c. 3000 BC)’.\textsuperscript{366}

The primacy of writing to orality has also been recognized by European historiography, which claims it to be scientific, though it is being criticized for its unilinear and stereotypical approach. ‘Yet if writing may be regarded as a form of internalized constraint, erasing certain modes of communal participation in knowledge, it also serves to emancipate from, or at least empower negotiations with, spatial and temporal limits.’ This idea of empowerment through the advent of print capitalism is underlined in Benedict Anderson’s understanding of nation as an ‘imagined community’.\textsuperscript{367}

Despite such popularity and importance of the newspaper, there was still a bias towards science. ‘Since the seventeen century ...Western science has excluded certain expressive modes from its legitimate repertoire....Literary texts were deemed to be metaphoric and allegorical, composed of inventions rather than observed facts; they allowed a wide latitude to the emotions, speculations, and subjective “genius” of their authors.’\textsuperscript{368} To recuperate its place in the hallowed domain of respected disciplines, literature, by the nineteen century, was co-opted ‘as a bourgeois institution closely allied with “culture” and “art”. Raymond Williams shows how this special, refined sensibility functioned as a kind of court of appeals in response to the perceived dislocations and vulgarity of industrial, class society. Literature and art were, in effect, circumscribed zones in which nonutilitarian, “higher” values were maintained.’\textsuperscript{369}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{365} Steve Clark – Writing. In Mike Featherstone, Couze Venn, Ryan Bishop and John Phillips (eds.). op. cit. p. 60.
\textsuperscript{366} Ibid.
\end{flushright}
In most of the literate societies, literature tries to be the upholder of morality of the society and hence the people involved in it occupy a higher status than the illiterate or semi-literate populace. This also happens in the case of Manipuri society. Manipuri society has a comparatively long history of writing culture. Its literature has also developed considerably in the 20th century. Till date it has produced 32 Sahitya Akademi award winners. However the script the modern Manipuri literature is written is Bengali. It has its own history also. According to R.K. Jhalajit Singh, 'Before the 19th century, Manipuri was written in a script called Manipuri script...In the 19th century, the Bengali-Assamese script also was used side by side with the Manipuri Script but after 1891, the former gradually supplanted the latter. By the thirties of the 20th century, Manipuri script became almost obsolete.' Today there is a strong movement spearheaded by people who are involved in the religious revivalist movement to revive this script. However, there is also conflict among the groups regarding the number of alphabets. One school of thought is of the view that it has 18 alphabets; the second claims that of 27; and the third of 35. But after much deliberation among scholars 27 alphabets consisting of 18 major alphabets and 9 derivatives was approved. However, this is not the end of the problem. Still some pressure groups are working for recognition of the scripts they are patronizing.

According to Jhalajit, 'the earliest reference to writing found in Manipuri literature is about a king who ascended the throne of the Ningthouja kingdom in 984 A.D.... There he referred to as fond of reading and writing even in this book.... It shows that there was written Manipuri literature in the tenth century A.D.' The approximately 1,200 year old history of Manipuri literature is broadly divided into four periods. First is the old period, which may fall in between the 8th century and 1074 A.D. The second is the early medieval period, which is between 1074 and 1709 A.D. The third period, the late medieval period is from 1709 to 1819 A.D. The fourth period is the modern period, which started after 1819 and continues till today.

---

The rise of the educated middle class and their contribution in the development of Manipuri literature has been discussed in Chapter 1. And also the prominence of scriptwriting in the proscenium theatre from the very beginning has been documented. The introduction of scriptwriting in Shumang Lila in the 1950s was a further step in incorporating cultural forms into the literate tradition. Today this tradition is replacing the oral one in most of the secular cultural practices and performances. However, the oral tradition is still maintained in ritual performances like Lai Haraoba and various folklores. This tradition survives simultaneously with their written/recorded forms. This sometimes creates a question of authenticity between the two when the literally circumscribed written record is juxtaposed with the oral form, which has the space for alteration, and personal experiments. However, the coming of written script in Shumang Lila also enabled the archiving of the literature making the understanding of the historical societal epochs reflected in them easier.

If one regards writing, particularly the print media, as one of the attributes of modernity as envisaged in the European understanding, then it is there in Manipur too. But the full-fledged modernity cannot be imagined even today when most of the social spheres are commanded by what we call tradition. This may further underline the discourse over the dichotomy of modernity and tradition. The term ‘modernity’ seems to carry inherent contradiction in meaning—of ‘order and chaos as modern twins’.374 It is understood through its geo-historical location.

The origin of modernity itself is a contested issue. The most popular claim is located in European Enlightenment (18th century), which heralded an age of reason highlighting individualism, critiquing religious and traditional authority, separating private from the public domain, and prompting emergence of liberal, secular, and democratic ideals. Another claim, which precedes the above temporality, posits modernity in the 16th century Dutch mercantilism. One thing common to both the temporalities is their emphasis on the rationality privileging science and technology. So, ‘rationality’ becomes the catchword for modernity. Following this, modernity is explained as multi-causal. The processes we call political, economic, social and cultural do away with the economic reductionism of modernity.

On the other hand, tradition consists of a set of social practices which seek to celebrate and inculcate certain behavioural norms and values, implying continuity with a real or imagined past, and usually associated with widely accepted rituals or other forms of symbolic behaviour. Tradition is a relative concept defined from the vantage point of modernity. So, it carries a negative baggage associated with being backward, primitive, non-scientific, and emotional. Social theorists have had one common predicament, i.e. seeing the world in binary opposition of industrial/modern and agricultural/traditional. This is clearly embedded in Durkheim’s mechanical and organic solidarity; Ferdinand Tonnies’ Gemeinschaft (community) and Gesellschaft (association); Talcott Parsons’ pattern variables—particularism/individualism (modern) versus universalism (traditional), achievement versus ascription, specificity versus diffuseness, and neutrality versus affectivity.

The influencing power of modernity is contingent upon the power structure prevalent in the world politics. The second half of the 20th century also saw the interrogation of rationality of the modernist West. The rationale behind Enlightenment was termed Eurocentric. Critics of modernity of the West raised questions on slavery, colonization, women, children, minorities’ rights and environment. This precipitated the attempts to redefine the concept of modernity that take into account the sacred, the non-instrumental and even the ‘irrational’. The debates, however, did not put a halt on considering modernity and tradition as binary opposites in concrete social terms. This relationship in the developing world can be translated as responses of traditional societies to the forces of modernity. The birth of multiple modernities is based on those responses.

Questioning modernity questions tradition. Tradition, which had been bottled up in a cocoon, is finding its window opening and sliding up in the Y axis from the negative domain to the positive. There is upsurge in the subaltern approach where local value systems, knowledge systems (read as local sciences) are encouraged as opposed to western modernity. The discourse now turns judgmental with the ‘eternal badness’ of the irrationality of tradition put under scrutiny. The celebration of tradition itself is made meaningful when the latter encounters modernity. In Manipur the rise of nationalism backed by the democratic ideals against the British on the one hand and feudalism on the other is the manifest sign of modernity. The intensification of identity politics, in the post-colonial era, among the various ethnic communities, which assert their past to define their
present, is the reflection of the lessons they learn from the modernist project. This also brings in the conflicts between unequals; and equals, to have control over the same space (territory). There is manifest sign of adaptation of most of the superficial icons of modernity rather than the very value attached to the modernity itself. This creates a crisis in ‘traditional’ society like those of Manipur. This uncritical acculturation impacts on the family relationship in particular and the cultural orientation in general. Such trial and tribulation during this nascent stage of modernity has been captured in Shumang Lila plays also.375

Modernity, especially the West European model, has been received differently in different societies. In India there has been debate between westernization and modernization, since modernity came through British imperialism. According to M.N. Srinivas,

The term ‘Westernization’, unlike ‘modernization’ is ethically neutral. Its use does not carry the implication that it is good or bad, whereas modernization is normally used in the sense that it is good. But there are other difficulties in westernization; ... it often involves. on the part of Westernized individuals, political or cultural hostility to the West. Moreover, not all the elements of Western culture in the eighteen and nineteen centuries originated in Western Europe.376

For Yogendra Singh,

Modernization in India started mainly with the Western contact, especially through establishment of the British rule. This contact had a special historicity which brought about many far reaching changes in culture and social structure of the Indian society. Not all of them, however, could be called modernizing. The basic direction of this contact was towards modernization, but in the process a variety of traditional institutions also got reinforcement. This demonstrates the weakness of assuming a neat contrariety between tradition and modernity. This polarity may be more heuristic than real.377

---

375 For an engaging debate on the modernity and tradition in India, in general and Manipur, in particular see Eastern Quarterly Vol. 3, Issue II (July–September 2005) on the theme Modernity, Tradition and Contested Space.

139
The understanding of modernity has gone awry in India. ‘Westoxication’ has replaced ‘westernization’ in India too. Dipankar Gupta sees such modernity as ‘mistaken modernity’. Meera Nanda also stresses the ‘superficial and schizophrenic’ nature of Indian modernity. Avijit Pathak sees modernity differently and does not see ‘our modernity’ as ‘mistaken’. For him modernity in India should not be seen as ‘an antithesis of tradition’.

The consciousness of one’s identity and the need to assert it vocally can be an effect of the modernist project. In Shumang Lila this is reflected when the Manipuri society was involved in the existential crisis, a crisis aroused by the necessity to assert its survival and to make its presence felt to an ‘other’. Theatre, in general and Shumang Lila, in particular, serve as a space where there can be comparatively open critical engagement about the happenings in the wider society which is not possible in a real social setting due to censoring by various forces, mainly groups.

1.1 Era of Religious and Historical as Cultural

The modernist ideals were reflected in Manipur when there was consolidation of the braiding between the religious and the cultural, which cannot be separated in Meitei society, during the 1950s. Again, history has been accommodated in the contemporary culture. This was felt in both form and content of Shumang Lila genres. The religious was co-opted by the cultural practitioners in order to create a sense of community and then a nationalist feeling among the Manipuris. This was orchestrated in both structure and content of plays of that time.

Structurally, Shumang Lila also follows the Natyasastra tradition of Sabha Vandana and Prastavna (bowing to the audience and king during monarchy) and were known as Kouwaz and Beitha which were mainly prologues of the plays. In terms of the content of these forms, initially they were sung in Bengali and were religious in theme i.e. invoking of Radha and Krishna to establish a Sankirtan in the performance space. But in

---

381 This will be studied more elaborately in the next chapter.
1957-58, the religious text was done away with and secular one was introduced and rendered in Manipuri with matching tune by Mutum Bori. It introduced patriotic elements in Shumang Lila which evoked the sense of historicity among the audience. This era was coincided with the political transition of Manipur from a Monarchical and feudalistic structure to a democratic one. With the moderation of the authoritative control of the monarchy there was considerable growth in the religious revivalist tendency and movement against Vaisnavism, which the protagonists of the new movement considered as 'outsider' and 'other'. During this era the religious sphere became the main site of anxiety and contest. The religious revivalism was started by Naoriya Phulo, a Manipuri (Meitei) who waged an anti-Brahmin and anti-Hindu movement in Cachar District of Assam in 1930. In Manipur valley, following him, a movement called Sanamahi (named after a Meitei house deity) was started in 1945. It was targeted more towards the Bengali hegemony in cultural sphere than towards fellow Meiteis. There is a presumption among some groups adhering to this indigenous belief system that Vaisnavism had eroded people from being rooted to their 'real' being and had coerced to side with the 'other'. Despite this Vaisnavite system remained the dominant system encompassing both religious and cultural spheres of the people.

Apart from this emerging crisis in religious and cultural domains, the historical shift of the political set up of Manipur after independence and her merger with India, brought in a systematization of the theatrical structure of this genre, which would be congenial to both the producers and the consumers. So, ideology and economy was brought together to create a form of negotiation between the producers and consumers. Part of this equation was the introduction of scriptwriting in 1950. This introduced genres of plays, ranging from religious to mythological, historical and above all social, which captured the tastes of the audiences. Incidentally the first scripted play was Puya Meithaba (burning of Puya or Puran) (1950), written by N. Angouton. It had religious theme which tried to retell the 'coercive' forces employed by the Hindu missionaries to convert Manipuris into Vaisnavism during the reign of king Pamheiba or Garibniwaz (1709-1751) under the instigation of Shantidas Goshai, a missionary of the Vaisnavite sect, Ramandi. This play was the first manifest attempt in Shumang Lila to go back to the past and assert the Manipuri identity. This case may not be interpreted entirely as a modern phenomenon, mainly the European concept, but a reiteration of the inherent tussle between 'self' and
‘other’, which is older than the ‘modernity’ itself. This play tries to instill realism in the fictionalized characters. Again it was loaded with essentialist motives, sometimes deflecting from the ‘authentic’ historical events, to instigate anger in the audience of how Manipuris were forced to convert to Hinduism. This creates a kind of dilemma in the minds of the audience. The audience was mostly constituted by Vaisnavas and yet they stood against the way they were converted.

But then whose history is real history? One needs to play with the history to meet certain ends. This is the ideological function of histories, which may not always be acknowledged. Here there is a slight blurring of boundary between fiction and non-fiction. Here history becomes narrative where there is possibility of selection, omission and construction of events. This new era of literate tradition in Shumang Lila with critiquing eye was coincided with a new step into ‘modernity’ with various qualifications in Manipur. The new political system also gave the liberty to employ the ideals associated with European Enlightenment project. ‘Although devices of narrativity such as plot, story, sequence and space are commonly thought to be appropriate to accounts which are not true, historians have deliberately inculcated narrativity into their practice to demonstrate processes and causality in real, true happenings. In the case of both fiction and historical non-fiction there is always a re-presentation of some prior events.’ 382 This approach was also owned up by the men behind this play Puya Meithaba. It was an attempt to arouse the sense of identity, which requires people to go back to the tradition and to the ‘glorious’ past of Manipur. People’s anger against dishonesty and treachery in a man’s character whose intensity could be doubled up when the perpetrator was an outsider was manifested in how the audience reacted to the play. Chandam Nilamani took the role of Lourembam Khongnangthaba, one of the most intelligent and revered scholars who opposed the conversion to Hinduism. N. Angouton, the scriptwriter himself, who was also one of the active members of the new movement, essayed the role of Shantidas Goshai. The verbal intellectual repartee between the two protagonists to establish the superiority of their respective religions, interspersed with sarcasm, mainly from the side of the latter, aroused an emotional fluidity among the audience, who were mainly Vaisnavites, yet moved by the event. The emotion was let loose when Angouton who took the role of Shantidas Goshai

382 Cobley, op. cit. p. 31.
was pelted by some in the audience. So, he had to pay the price for his sincere portrayal of
the character and also for furthering his personal crusade against the person whose
character he wholeheartedly essayed. But that was a different space and time.

In case of *Puya Meithaba* play, there is a deliberate effort of introducing the
subjective motives and ideology of the individual i.e. the scriptwriter to the structure. Here
Angouton, the scriptwriter was also an ardent follower of the new movement. His ideology
was in contradistinction to the dominant ideology and cultural and religious reality of the
people. This is proven by the fact that Meitei society is a harmonious amalgamation of the
indigenous and the Sanskritic tradition. But the revivalist movement, which the dramaturge
follows, tries to do away this ‘impurity’ in its endeavour to establish purist Meitei
nationhood. Though the play impacted much on the audience, there was no revolution to
throw out the Vaisnavite system out-rightly. This is because the audience consists of an
informed public. They know that the real social system is in conflict with the picture
created in the play. Moreover the time was not ripe for a new system to replace the
dominant one, though the new system might be emerging.

Angouton was specialized in this genre of historical and mythological plays. He
later wrote plays like *Imoinu Chahongbi* (on the house female deity of the same name).
*Charairongba, Saiyon taret, Heikru Hidongba* etc. Later the two plays, *Puya Meithaba* and
*Imoinu Chahongbi* were met with objections from the side of the authority. The Bar
Association of Manipur registered its disappointment saying that it was unlike a civilized
society to look down upon the civilization and culture of another people (read as Bengali),
which these plays supposedly did. Following this opinion Ahanthem Nilamani gave new
names *Kangla Phambalda Thambal* (Thambal (the queen whom Garibniwaz forcibly
married) in palace) for *Puya Meithaba* and *Washak Ngakpa* (keeping of the promise) for
*Imoinu Chahongbi*. For this Elangbam Nilakanta, a renown scholar, presented Rs. 4000 for
each of these plays. Even today the recorded audio version of *Puya Meithaba* is able to stir
the sentiments of the Manipuris and germinate the sense of historicity in their minds.

Here there is constant engagement with one’s ideology, in this case that of the
scriptwriter. His ideology was in contradistinction to the dominant ideology and cultural
and religious reality of the people. This is proven by the fact that Meitei society is a
harmogious amalgamation of the indigenous and the Sanskrit tradition. But the revivalist movement, which the dramaturge follows, tries to do away this ‘impurity’ in its endeavour to establish a purist Meitei nationhood.

In this initial period of this phase there was also reliving of the oral tradition, when the Moirang Parba, was still popular among the audience. Among the popular mythological and historical plays, which otherwise were performed with written scripts, were Shandrembi Cheisra, Laiyninghtou Khoriphaba, Pidonnu, Kabui Keioiba, Ngangbiton, Shanthalembi, Pamheiba (about the king Garibniwaz), Bhagyachandra (about the king who reigned from 1759 to 1762 and 1763 to 1798), Phadok Pemcha etc. These plays were not performed just for the sake of performing but had social messages which were relevant to the contemporary time. For instance, Charairongba 383 (1952) of Angouton was about the integrity of the king Charairongba (1698-1709), the father of Garibniwaz, to all his subjects both in hills and valley. He was the first king who converted to Vaishnavism and followed Sri Krishna and Radha. The play was built on the theme of power struggle and idealism. The story goes this way. When he became strong enough to understand and face the world, Khwai Kekru, a maichou (scholar) narrated the story of how his father Paikhomba was killed by hill people and his head taken away to their village as war trophy. The maichou infused Charairongba with strength to retrieve his father’s head to avenge the shame. Accordingly he invaded the village, fought a bloody battle and fled from the place along with his father’s head. Here the setting is the battleground. After this accomplishment he performed U kronghongba (burying of skull) ceremony for his father’s head offering the skull to the Lainingthou Sanamahi, a house deity. This has a happy ending with the accomplishment of the hero’s adventure.

In this feat of retrieving the skull, he was helped by Chaibi, a hill girl, whom he brought to the palace and married and promised to give the title of the eldest queen. But objections brewed in the palace when Khwai Kekru advised the king to rethink his decision, which he thought was not acceptable by the people as she was a hill woman. In the mean time Chaibi also showed her strength and reiterated his promise to her. He later made her a queen. But there was a laiwa (prognosis) that he would be killed by his own son. So, he ordered his men to kill every son born to his many wives. But Pamheiba was

383 Gathered from Angouton.
saved from this ordeal and was sent to a hill village where he grew up. Later he was brought to the palace as there was no male issue to succeed him. But the king was killed accidentally by Pamheiba. This shows the setting of the court intrigue. This play also depicted the relationship of ‘self’ and ‘other’ between the hill and valley people, yet the closeness defined by the intermarriage between the two. All these were relevant in this era when the purity and pollution between the hill and valley people was still intact and were enacted for the audience to learn a lesson from the past. This is important for Shumang Lila as it, like other performing art forms, involves both efficacy and entertainment, which are braided to each other to form a whole. It establishes a link to an absent ‘other’; abolishes time and space and creates a symbolic time and space; brings the ‘other’ ‘here’ and also it means for those who are ‘here’ and emphasizes ‘now’.

1.2 Representations of the Dynamics within the Family

Other than plays with religious, historical and mythological themes, this era of 1950s 60s also saw plays, which addressed the macro and micro facets of social and familial relationships in Manipuri society. One of the first plays was *B.A. Mapa Lamboiba* (adoption of monkhood by a father of a B.A) of 1950. It was a social play, which reflected the change and frailty in the social relationship with the coming of modernization and higher education in the post-war and post-independence era. The dissipation of *thakshi khasti* (discipline) between elder and younger people in the family and social life was the main theme of this play. Here a son who is a B.A. passed thinks himself to be the master of his own destiny and goes his own ways disrespecting the wisdom of his father. There is a generation gap between the two. The tussle between the modernity and tradition is also witnessed in this play, when the son asserts his own individuality, which might sound dislocated in a time when there is rampant affirmations of the communitarian norms. But the sign of the gradual development of individuality is shown when the father instead of disciplining his son retires to his own fate and becomes *lamboiba* (monk) distancing himself from the pressures of the ‘modern’ world.

This era also saw the upsurge of value-loaded ‘social plays’ performed by the organised troupes in nook and corner of the valley and even outside it. Such social plays succeeded in highlighting the various socio-politico-economic dynamics of Manipur. Such
plays were an expression of the anxieties faced by the people with the degeneration of the family values. Such tragi-comedies resorted to melodrama in which the comedians who form a part of the play take a vital role in entertaining the audiences. In this phase when there was a need for an articulate scriptwriter to address the social intricacies G.C. Tongbra (Tongbram Gitchandra) gave the right response with his satirical social plays in 1950s and 60s. He came as a refreshing force, both in the field of theatre and Manipuri literature, who critically analyzed the unconscious social facts which people had rarely cared to heed for. This surprised and infused people with a belated consciousness creating laughter in their faces and questions in their minds.

Some of his popular plays were Matric Pass, Mani Mamou (Mother-in-law and daughter-in-law) (1958)\textsuperscript{384}, Nongpok Leima, Ningon Mawa Pass (Pass in the test for son-in-law), Meitei Chanu (Meitei woman) (1965), Memthoibi, etc. One very popular element of this era was the continuity with the ‘postlude’. I am using here the concept of ‘postlude’. It is similar to the concept of interlude except that it comes at the end of the play.

One such ‘postlude’ was Yaoshang Kangou (fried peanuts of Yaoshang or Holi) of G.C. Tongbra. This short skit had a very strict brother as the disciplinarian of the family. On one yaoshang\textsuperscript{385} thabal day both his younger brother and sister were eager to go out and participate in the dance party. But he refused permission saying it was undignified and wasteful and made them stay home and study. His father was also willing to venture out and see the programme but was reluctant to do so lest he be construed as irresponsible in front of his son. He instead told the strict son to take rest while he took the turn to look after his ‘studying’ children. But the gyrating sound of the thabal made it difficult for them concentrate on their study but instead it started enthralling them. Slowly all of them, including the father, began to sway to the beats individually. Unable to latch their inner desire the father took the hands of both his son and daughter and started dancing hand in hand in a circle on the verandah of their house. When the disciplinarian son came out he

\textsuperscript{384} This play is elaborately studied in Chapter VI.

\textsuperscript{385} Yaoshang is another name of Holi in Manipur which starts on the full moon day of Mera (March) and goes on for five days. In the nights thabal chongba dances are organised by the local girls where they dance hand in hand with boys from different villages and localities, in the beats of dhol (drums) and other musical instruments like clarinet etc. This is a socially accepted space where the girls and boys can mingle and have a healthy expression of their emotions to one another under the watchful eyes of the local elders. This is a modern element in a traditional society.
saw them and all of them burst into laughter. The parallel reading of it unmasks the message on the officiousness, which may hamper one's personal growth. Either one is able to really enjoy the yaoshang kangou sold in the Thabal venue or think of its delectable taste from a distance. The choice makes a lot of difference in one's own social interaction skill, showing us why plays may also be read as literature and analysed accordingly.

Shumang Lila of this era was also a medium to look into the unconscious realms of the traditional society. In this endeavour there were plays exposing the foibles in the family relationship due to the uncertainty aroused by the meeting of modernity and tradition or two traditions i.e. its exposure to the social realities of Indian society. One very forceful play depicting the constant turmoil in a polygamous family was 50,000 (1961) and another, which addressed the influx of the decadent culture of dowry, was A-oonpot (early 1960s).386 Another play of this year, which addressed the sensitive issue of religion, was Mahaprabhu Phita Onba (Measurement of Mahaprabhu with phita, the measuring tape).387 This play was to critique the obscurantist elements of Vaisnavism felt mainly by the neo-revivalist elements of the society. These plays were followed by the three series of Ningol (the maiden) of Heingang Party under M. Binod. A family drama to the core it was about Mohini, a lone and pampered sister of two brothers. This girl grew up to become a responsible woman in the face of the injustice done to her, but in the end, tragically, commits suicide, since the conventional injustice of society is too much for her to bear.

In the first part, the two brothers, one of whom is a police officer, takes care of Mohini, letting her to do whatever she wishes. In this midst, one bad character of the locality took advantage of this, abducts her and molests her. Infuriated by this heinous incursion into the virtue of his sister, the younger brother (police officer) takes revenge by shooting the perpetrator dead. As punishment both the brothers are incarcerated. Here the ending is just by revenging the evil deed of the villain, though the two brothers also pay for the crime. In the second part the two brothers are freed from the jail and get married. Again a new evil character is introduced in the form of the wife of the younger brother. There is a tussle of ego between her and Mohini. By now the latter is no longer that carefree girl but a responsible and tolerant woman. The former keeps on bullying Mohini even for the most

386 Details of both the plays are given in Chapter VI.
387 This play was again performed by the female troupe in the second half of the 1970s. This is discussed in Chapter V.
trivial matter and ignores her in most of the family matters. Unable to bear it any longer Mohini decides to commit suicide and jumps into a river and gets drowned.

The third part is important as it gives the last message of the whole series. Stricken by the grief of his sister’s presumed death the elder brother becomes seriously ill and dies leaving behind his wife and one son. The younger brother also has one son and he looks after and treats both his sister-in-law and nephew very well. However, his wife is the antagonist who always thinks of her selfish space and keeps on bothering both the mother and son. On the other hand the two boys become quite intimate to each other and grow up together. One day a candy seller comes, doing his business and shouting Mithai (candy). They buy some, and enjoy eating it. In this particular scene, the candy man entertains the children with his song describing his goods. This becomes a haunting and nostalgic note later in the play. Despite this love between the two boys the ill-treatment does not stop from the side of the wife of the police officer. Unable to bear this constant nagging the mother and son leave the place and head for Moirang, a place 40 km away from Imphal, in Bishnupur district. While they roam around, one day they stumble upon Mohini. Their joys know no bounds. Mohini actually survives the suicide and settles down at Moirang since then without others having the knowledge of her identity. The trio, then, started living there happily. In the mean time the police officer comes to know of this happy news and meets Mohini. The two boys by now are grown up, the one at Moirang becomes a lawyer and the other becomes a wayward criminal. The latter character is a metaphor of the rise of criminalization in the society, during this phase, with robbery (pot munba) and burglary (sagun touba) affecting the peaceful existence. He is jailed for his crime and the former fights for his case. Finally the two long lost friends are united. This scene again brings in the candy man with his signature song moving both the cousins to tears remembering their childhood days. Now they relive their early days. This scene was a tear jerker. The whole family is finally united defeating the ill motives of the police officer’s wife. This play reaffirms the very popular theme of power struggle.

One of the most popular plays of the 1960s which is remembered and whose dialogues are mimicked till today was Ipagi Ibungo (my son) (1969) of North Imphal Jatra

368 M. Binod was chocked and was not able to narrate the scene coherently as tears ran down on his cheeks describing it. He was the one who experienced it all and that remained intact.
Mandal or Heingang Party under the leadership of M. Binod and scripted by Ngarangbam Ibohal. After this play Binod began to be known as Jagat Singh Daku (dacoit Jagat Singh) after the protagonist. This is also a family drama to the core, which consolidates the aphorism ‘my blood is thicker than yours’. This is about two orphans who are ill-treated by his own uncle. The uncle confiscates the property share of the father of the two boys in connivance with a treacherous lawyer. This infuriates Shyamkanhai, the elder brother and he avenges the betrayal by killing the lawyer and flees to the jungle. Then he disguises himself as one dacoit, Jagat Singh Daku, very much like the enigmatic figures in Manipur of those days. However he is a noble soul like Robin Hood helping out the needy people. In the mean time his name becomes popular and this is intolerable for his cousin, the son of the wicked uncle. The latter, then, starts carrying out unlawful activities in the name of Jagat Singh which creates a fear psychosis among the people. Jagat Singh’s wife gives birth to a baby boy and they are leading a normal life with his brother’s family, oblivious of the fact that Jagat Singh is actually Shyamkanhai. After some years one day he visits his home in disguise, meets his brother who is not able to identify him and enquires about his wife and son the way any person would do. The brother tells him that the son is grown up but that his wife had died. To this shocking news he looks up at the photograph of his wife hung on the wall (through mime imagining the photograph on the wall). Then he weeps making the brother suspicious of why he is crying at all. The latter sees the black mark on Jagat’s neck and is assured that he is his brother only. Unable to hide, Jagat is just about to disclose and embrace his brother and the sound of the police’s whistle comes after which he vanishes to the darkness of the night without making him known. The police officer who is in charge to nab him is none other than his own son. In the last scene the two who do not know each others’ identity have a big encounter. In this physical tussle Jagat Singh rolls his revolver and simultaneously grabs the police officer overpowering him. This formidable feat was the deciding factor of the popularity of Binod among the audience given his short stature (about 5 ft.). Later he realizes that the police officer is his own son and he readily surrenders to him. He discloses his identity to the son finally. But he is incarcerated, as he is an absconder and ‘criminal’ in the eyes of the authority and in the imagination of the people. This play tries to showcase the strong family bond in the form of love of a father towards his son, so the name Ipagi Ibungo (my son). Also this brought
in a new turn in the depiction of antagonist. Here the main antagonist is a male while many previous plays concentrated on the female ones.

In such plays, there is in-depth analysis of relationships within the family. The representations also emphasized the changing values, probably, due to exposure to new cultural and economic strands from other societies and also new media of entertainment and communication. There are also cases of generation gap between the new and older generation in terms of perceptions of values, eating habits, dressing sense etc. in particular and life style in general. There is ‘superficial’ adoption of modernity in many cases, though the adoption of the universal values of modernity by some may not be negated in toto. On the other hand there is experimentation with the traditional system. This can be seen when there is modification in the form and retention of the content. All this are reflected in the family relationship in Manipuri society.

This is not an exclusive case of Manipuri society but happens in other ‘modernizing’ societies in India and other parts of the world. But we have to really be careful about the conceptual clarity in understanding what a family is constituted by and what are the other systems related to family. Especially in India, the concepts of family and household need to be understood clearly though they are related to each other. This will make the sociological study more fruitful.389

The changes in the modes of relationship amongst the members of a family, especially, between daughter-in-law and mother-in-law, are clearly reflected in most of the plays, which I have discussed in this section. Running a family or household s considered being an art in Manipuri society. There is a saying in Manipuri, ‘Yum panba haibasi sektagi leingoidagisu henna kuppi’ (Running a family is finer than the sand of the Sekta River).

---

2. Second Phase: Musically Political and Commercial

This phase marks many changes both in generic and thematic terrains of Shumang Lila. Politically also the 1970s was a tumultuous era with the rise of insurgency\(^{390}\) to demand ‘sovereignty’ of Manipur from the Indian Union despite Manipur gaining the statehood in 1972. This was also an era of the beginning of militarisation of civil spaces in the state. This was felt by Shumang Lila too. It started involving itself into didactic enterprises which drove the audiences not only ‘to feel’ but also ‘to think’ over the state of affairs. This does not mean that there was a complete cease on the production of the plays with family and morality themes. In fact they are always present across the phases and will remain so. In addition to this there was increasing of the commercialization of Shumang Lila, in the sense that there started a trend where entertainment element, following the ‘hollywood’ style of cultural production, was given more importance to lure the audience. This means people, mainly the artistes, started taking this theatre form seriously making it as their only profession.

This era saw an increasing growth of assimilation of capitalist elements in different facets of society in general and cultural production and consumption in particular. This means there was also commodification of cultural practices and performances. However, capitalist motives cannot be solely interpreted as a negative development, as generally done in the academic circle. This has been emphasized by Shane Gunster in his thorough analysis of the dynamics within capitalism.\(^{391}\)

The contemporary subjectivity, which drives the cultural politics, is visible in Shumang Lila domains also. 1970s also saw the entry of *Nupi Shumang Lila*\(^{392}\) troupes (female troupes) into the Shumang Lila culture though female artistes had been part of the proscenium theatre since 1940s. It was a movement to revive the forgotten tradition of *Moirang Parba* in Shumang Lila, which had been overtaken by social plays since 1950s. The movement was feminist, not in the sense that it was anti-male but to plug a vacuum

\(^{390}\) See Introduction for details on the emergence of insurgency in Manipur.


\(^{392}\) This is studied in Chapter V.
and to materialize the sense of responsibility and creativity of the female artistes. It started a politically purist approach to rectify the ‘adulteration’ seen in the old Moirang parba forms of the monarchical era.

The need to organize Shumang Lila in an orderly manner was also felt and in 1971 the All Manipur Jatra Association was established. This was also an era when the authority representing the government was also in intervention mode. The struggle for hegemony, which is a process, continues during this era also. When the initial celebration of Sanskritic culture started fading, a new form of power group sprang up to take the place. As mentioned elsewhere, it did not mean the complete collapse of the previous elements. The reflective politics, which had been going on in Shumang Lila, was given a formal face with the intervention of Manipur State Kala Akademi, a cultural body affiliated to the government of Manipur which was established in 1972. Initially it organized annual festivals under the name of ‘Jatra Festivals’. The politically conscious self was unearthed with introspection on the very name ‘Jatra’, which it felt was inappropriate for an indigenous performing art form. So, in 1973 the Akademi officially changed the name into ‘Shumang Lila’. This official version was also taken up by the troupes and the audiences in general. However the residual elements of Jatra will remain for a considerable time in the minds and vocabulary of both troupes and audience. There are still names of the troupes which have Jatra in them. For instance, Meitei Leima Jatra cum Drama Association and North Imphal Manipur Jatra Mandal.

The next big change of this phase was coming up of a new genre called Eshei Lila. In an effort to augment the aesthetic elements, many troupes experimented with playback singing, which was interspersed at the right time in the performance, on the line of Bollywood movies. They use musical instruments such as tabla, dholak, harmonium, guitar, flute, violin, keyboard and various others, to give befitting music for scenes enacted. This shows how music is important to effect a good and commercially attractive presentation. The song and dance sequences were so intricately rendered by those neo Nupi Shabis (male actresses). This again introduced a tradition of male singers singing in female voices. It was degeneration for many and refreshing changes for others since new things seem delectable and impressionable. However, good music and dance sequences are not

394 Gathered from M. Binod.
ticket to a successful production without other equally good elements, such as theme, acting etc. The change came as a response to the booming media of entertainment such as Cinema and Television. This brought in professionalism augmenting commercialization. Some of the *Eshei Lilas* of that time were *Krishna Bal Lila* (1975), *Thadoi* (1976) and *Ashira Mioibagi Punshi* (Is this a life?) (1977).

With this change, there also arose the generation gap between the already existing and popular troupes who stuck to their old tradition of performance style and new troupes who wanted ‘modern’ elements as mentioned above. So, two broad categories of Shumang Lila emerged viz. 1) *Dialogue Lila* (play without background music) and 2) *Eshei Lila*. But they were renamed and recognized by Manipur State Kala Academy as 1) *Ariba Shumang Lila* (old type of Shumang Lila) and 2) *Anouba Shumang Lila* (new Shumang Lila). This ushered in the culture of ‘filmisation’ of Shumang Lila too with its emphasis given on the colourful costumes, make-up, etc. which in a way invited showism. This does not mean that these new genre lacked in the subtlety of plots and techniques. Its rapid growth became a major reason for the downfall and demise of Ariba Shumang Lila. Today Manipur has only *Eshei Lila* genre. The audience also supports the colourful world of *Eshei Lila* since their tastes are also driven by the new world of cinema. Coincidentally the first Manipuri feature film (black and white) *Matamgi Manipur* (Manipur of the time), produced by K.T. Films, was released in 1972. This initiated the enthusiasm among the cinema lovers, mainly professionals associated with the performing arts, to further this new medium. Though Manipuris had already been absorbed in Hindi films by now, this initiative to turn inward was a step to go back to the roots. Hence, the first colour feature film *Langlen Thadoi* came in 1985. However, this cinematic movement constructed Manipuri films in the mould of Hindi films, in terms of structure, like retaining of the play back singing. Considerable influences of Hindi films also have to do with the Manipuris’ cultural and religious affiliation with India’s Hindi belt.

Such influence of Hindi movies percolated well to the *Dialogue Lila* too. In 1972-73 *Mirot* came which was an adaptation of the Hindi film *Lal Rekha*. Another play in this mould was *Punshi Khongloi* (Life Partner) of Heingang Party, which was an adaptation of the Hindi Film *Arju*. *Yong Natte Mee-ni* (Not a monkey but a man), was influenced by *Chhota Bhai*. The main forte of this play was the female antagonist which tried to outdo the character essayed in the Hindi version by Lalita Pawer, the quintessential wicked
female character of Hindi Films. In this period Abir Khan, one of the most popular plays ever, was performed by Meitei Leima Jatra cum Drama Association. This was based on the relationship among the inhabitants of Manipur – Meiteis, Hill people and Meitei Pangal (Muslims). Shumang Lila’s love of the foreign theme was again seen in the form of Huranba, again of Heingang Party, which was from an original Bengali play. Then came Devdas (1974-75), performed by the City Jatra Mandal. With this there was also manifest influence of the proscenium techniques in Shumang Lila. This play was guided by the Gurus of Roopmahal, a renowned theatre group, who infused the ingredients of good and enjoyable play. The role of Devdas was taken by Inakhunba of Heingang village, who, since then, came to be known by his character’s name.

This trend of adaptation of cultural products originating from outside Manipur can be located within the discursive terrains of ‘interculturalism’ and ‘intraculturalism’. The above cultural exchange can be seen first in a positive way in the sense that it is against the edicts of ‘cultural differentiation, whereby cultures are segregated by impermeable boundaries so that their individual purity can be maintained’. This asserts the coexistence of cultures ‘in mere spatiality, without interpenetration’. The adaptation is a different form of translation of ‘others’ culture into ‘our’ culture. Cultural translation cannot be holistic and involves the omission of certain unfitting elements and ‘indigenizing’ certain elements. Nevertheless it is ‘a means of avoiding the ethnocentric extremities of inferiorising other cultures on the basis of their incommensurable difference and of universalizing them on the basis of imagined family resemblances. Translation provided the means by which it was possible to accept that cultures and the languages embodied in them are “different, but not so different as all that.” Such cultural translation, in general terms, is made more effective in dramatic performances when the sensibility of the originating culture is well kept in mind. This argument has been posed against the anthropologists’ translation through ethnography. Talal Asad, ‘specifies that in the ethnographer’s construction of a text for a specific audience within the “discursive

---

395 See Chapter VI for the discussion.
396 This play was much in demand in the Andro, a Chakpa village in the eastern side of Imphal. The villagers invited the troupe almost on the eve of every marriage ceremony in the village. For account on Chakpa community see Introduction.
397 The performance of this play in the 21st century avatar will be studied later in this chapter.
398 These concepts will be elaborated upon in the section of Phase three.
400 Ibid. p. 88.
games” of academic institutions, the purpose is to “read about another mode of life”, and not “to learn to live a new mode of life.” So, ‘translation in theatre is...a more empathetic, variable, and psycho-physical act than the “translation of culture” in ethnography, whose performitivity remains at best a rhetorical strategy in a reflexive representation of the other.’ Adaptation or translation of other cultures is possible because of sharing of some common elements between the two exchanging cultures. Bharucha in his critique of Peter Brook’s Mahabharata sees an essentializing element in the latter’s affirmation that ‘the Mahabharata is Indian, but it is universal’. He has problems with the ‘but’ and prefers to say ‘the Mahabharata is universal because it is Indian’. But then his argument suffers from a fallacy, which assumes that anything Indian is universal. It gives more space to universality, keeping aside the particular element of ‘Indianness’. It may be an endeavour to establish a hegemonic status of Indians and to drive away the ghost of being subjected, to a receiver status, by the Europeans. In Brooks’ case there is still a balance between the particular and the universal. The possible alternative could be ‘the Mahabharata is Indian yet it is universal’. In our context we juxtapose two particulars, as ‘Devdas is Bengali yet it is Manipuri’. Here such interrelation is made possible by the universal embedded in the particular, in this case, Bengali Devdas. This means an alien cultural product can also be owned up as one’s own, once it is indigenized to fit into his/her culture. The negative part of the story is the homogenizing and hegemonizing tendencies which come with the translation, especially, when it is directed from ‘there’ not from ‘here’. In case of Shumang Lila theatre, the adaptation is done purely by the insiders of the culture. Still it cannot be claimed that it is harmless, especially when the globalizing cultural forces are growing so strongly, which entrenches into the psyches of the people even unconsciously. This means the balance between the inflow and outflow of the cultural products or cultural traits should be maintained, given the fact that cultures are not separated by watertight compartments.

After this trend of adaptation there came some plays with strong political themes. The play Halakhidraba (the one who never came back) of 1975-76 brought to light the excesses committed by the State Armed Forces. It was a play based on the raping of a girl called Charui Rose of Ukhrul by BSF personnel in 1974, who later committed suicide. The


\[402\] See Chapter VI for discussion.
state power was manifested when it banned this play. Again in 1978-79 *Eegi Nong*⁴⁰³ (Rain of blood) of Chana Lukhoi came which depicted the state violence against the civilians. For this the writer was incarcerated. Despite such interference the show goes on since Shumang Lila exists on the nerves of the people.

The political unrest was not always between the ‘self’ and ‘other’ but also within the ‘self’ itself when splinter groups within Manipuri society scrambled for their space on this platform with its contradictory dynamics. This was aptly depicted by the ‘folk’ play *Chaina pung*⁴⁰⁴ (the battle ground), which was the tussle between two rival Meitei clans, Luwang and Khuman. Again another play with revolutionary theme was *Sharangi nongsha* (Lion in cage).⁴⁰⁵

Shumang Lila cannot be monolithic in its form and content. It is a wholesome theatre where entertainment and efficacy are braided in a healthy manner. So, plays with various themes, other than the political, relating to the insurgency problem, like the unemployment problem, the generation gap between the old and the new, changing family relationships also were part of this phase. The period of 1980s saw numerous plays on family relationship such as *Imou Ibema* (My daughter-in-law) (1981), *Keinadan* (Gifting of the bride) (1981), *Nangdaniko Imounupi* (the only daughter-in-law) (1986), *Leishabigi Machado* (that son of the maiden), *Lady Killer* (1989)⁴⁰⁶ etc.

1990s saw some of the powerful political plays against the people who misappropriate the power. *Ee-gi Mahao*⁴⁰⁷ (1991) represented the inability of the powerless to voice out their grievances for justice. A futuristic play *23rd Century* (1992) was the depiction of the chinks within the Manipuri society and the advantage taken by outsiders seeing this divided house. It showed Manipur under the rule of a Punjabi Chief Minister in the futuristic 23rd Century. It was a grim prognosis which rattled the sentiments of the people of Manipur. This era was also teeming with plays with essentialist motives harping on the history. *Lanpungi Pungkhol* (the sound of the war drum) (1994-95), performed by Naharol Khongthang Artistes Association, addressed the genesis of insurgency in Manipur with threadbare analysis of the ‘Merger Agreement’. *Keisamthong

⁴⁰³ See Chapter VI.
⁴⁰⁴ Performed by Heingang Party.
⁴⁰⁵ Of the same troupe.
⁴⁰⁶ Description of all these plays is done in the Chapter VI.
⁴⁰⁷ See Chapter VI.
Thoibi (1997)\textsuperscript{408} was a forceful play which addressed the question of purity and pollution between the hill and valley people. It contained the age old time pass of Brahmin bashing but with subtlety.

‘Folk’ plays with contemporary relevance did not cease to come up too. Numit Kaappa\textsuperscript{409} (Shooting down the sun) (1997) was a mythological play about two brothers who simultaneously ruled Manipur, one from dusk to dawn and the other from dawn to dusk in rotation. They symbolized two suns shining all the time without any concept of night. Here night is construed as the time for rest for the subjects of the kings. People were under heavy duress serving both the kings day and night. So, a hero called Khwai Nungjeng Piba decided to revolt against the misrule. He was of the view that there could not be two suns at the same time and one had to go. He gathered people for the revolt and also requested his father-in-law, a Khulakpa\textsuperscript{410} (chief) of Nongmaiijing Hill. But the chief did not extend help initially and also advised his daughter to come along with him as the battle would be a dangerous one which might cost Piba’s life. However the daughter refused and pledged to be with her husband till his last moment. Unable to dissuade Piba, the chief finally joined hands with him and fought against the combined force of the two kings. Piba killed the elder brother and the younger brother fled to the jungle. People requested Piba to take over the throne and rule them but he refused to do so saying it was not his intention to be a king. His only motive behind the war was to bring justice and prosperity to the suffering people. Instead he sent for the banished king who was brought back and given the throne. Piba served the king like a devoted subject. The play is extraordinary in the sense that there could be people who sacrifice their personal power and gains for the larger good of the people. This is also the ideal message for the people involved in the power politics in today’s ‘modern’ world.

Angangba Phiral (Red flag) scripted by Chana Lukhoi came after this play. This was with a leftist theme, which was based on the killing of workers in Chicago by American Government. This play was out and out political, which tried to connect with the struggling people of Manipur. It was performed consecutively for two years on the May Day at Irobot Park, Lamlai (east of Imphal).

\textsuperscript{408} See Chapter VI for the details.
\textsuperscript{409} Performed by M. Binod's troupe.
\textsuperscript{410} Piba married Chakhanou, the daughter of a khulakpa (chief) of Nongmaiijing Hill. The chief was angry against this marriage as Piba was of different community (Meitei) and snapped the ties with his daughter afterwards.
Such political plays enable us to discern the contemporary political terrains which are very much part of the existential experience of the people. In fact cultural production has been a carrier and critic of political dynamics. The forms may be paintings, music, theatre or electronic media. The politics played by paintings is stressed by Christopher Pinney when he says that ‘pictures were an integral element of history in the making’.

The cultural politics in the field of literature is also well known. One of them is that of Dalits’ search for an alternative literature to the one of classical Hinduism. This search started in the 1960s. ‘The brilliant young generation of Marathi dalits’ who regarded ‘the American Blacks as their model ... founded the “Dalit Panthers” in Bombay in 1972’. In Tamil Nadu this movement gained its momentum in 1980s only. Another example of how literary works are meant to disseminate the massage of power is the representation of Bunyan’s ‘The Pilgrim’s Progress’ in African context during colonial times. The Ndebele translation of the same has illustrations typical of the White people’s superiority over the Blacks. One of the illustrations shows angels as White people and ignorance as Black.

### 2.1 Ipom as Interlude

In this midst of political unrest and sweeping changes and introduction of new elements, both indigenous and extraneous, in the field of arts a need for a comic breather was felt. As a result the new genre *Ipom* emerged on the lines of *Phagee Lila* or *Thok Lila*, as an interlude to the serious social and political plays. It is not to say that it was not devoid of social messages but it communicated ideas through a lighter vein. Its emergence gave an alternative to stereotyped performance style and also served as a tool for inversion of the proclaimed ‘truth’ both of the state and civil society, purely through its parody. So, it was little more than farce.

In 1975-76 Nongmaithem Sudhir Singh, a theatre personality thought of starting a purely comic genre within the framework of Shumang Lila as he was dissatisfied with the tit-bit roles given to the comedians in the conventional plays. He invited two comedians each from all the troupes for an audition. The test comprised of two stages. In the first the

---


two members from the same troupe were made to perform and in the second stage the partners were exchanged to see the compatibility and chemistry between the partners. After these sessions Chaoba, Babu, Keirao Tikisana shabi (Nupi Shabi), Nitaichand (sometimes Nupi Shabi), Manglem from Uchiwa, and later Oinam Babu were selected as a team. The name of this troupe and the genre then became Ipom. The literal meaning of Ipom is wave because it created series of laughter like any water wave as the scenes move subsequently one after another and last scene is able to give the largest impact. Moreover the laughter becomes infectious and moves like a wave among the audience.

Ipom also tried its hand in the All Manipur Shumang Lila Festivals in 1977-78, though it was not able to win any award. In 1980 the group broke up into two splinter groups. One group had Chaoba and Babu and later in 1982 were joined by K. Achoubi Singh as Nupi Shabi. They entertained people with their various productions. The younger generation finds it very innovative although they do not have the historical idea of its precedents. Nevertheless the time frame is different, though the form is that of Phagee Lila etc. Like in Phagee Lila, Ipom was successful only because of the charismatic qualities of these doyens of comedy – Chaoba, Babu, Mayang Imphal Tombi. The plots were made up instantly even when they were in the dressing room and adjusted the scenes so that the most hilarious ones were kept for the last laugh.

The aesthetics of Ipom does not lie in the plots of the story but in the way the story is told. There was decorum on the part of the performers. If the first performer was able to arouse laughter then the next performer must also try to improve upon it so that a louder response was received. If not it was considered to be a rejection from the side of the audience and a personal failure on the part of the performer. For instance, if one said, “Koubruda leiba mee pumnamak ichao thok-e haidana tampakta loina chenarakle hairine” (It is heard that there is a huge flood in the Koubru Mountain and all the dwellers have been evacuated to the valley), then the respondent would say, “Oho! Aduna oire Lokoatka mangari mayam shing hapni haina thouthakhrabdo...” (O! that is why I saw many trucks heading for Loktak Lake to load logs.) One can see the paradoxical contents (like flood in the mountain, wood in the lake) in the two claims and non-existent connection between them, though the two speakers are responding to each other. There lies the beauty of the sharp sense of humour augmented by subtexts such as facial contortions,
body stance and the tone of the sounds etc. It also shows us why reading the contexts of a script comes easily to viewers when they belong to the society.

Such repartee is also created through the intelligent usage of the traditional proverbs, sayings, riddles etc. which are given new contexts and meanings. Moreover the performers invented some of them and they still form part of the day-to-day parlance. For instance, the Ipom, *Chingaiwa* is on the day-to-day gossips and rumours. The word Chingaiwa (the mouth which speaks words which break up healthy relationships) (1988-89) itself is the modification of *Higaiwa*.\(^{414}\) The story goes this way. There is a newly married couple, the husband played by Babu and the wife by Achoubi and a friend of the husband, played by Chaoba. As the two are newly married they are busy with themselves shutting out the outside world including the friend. As usual Chaoba comes to Babu’s home but the latter ignores him as if he does not hear the former’s call. Jealous and feeling hurt and left out, Chaoba cooked a plan to teach some manners to the couple. Chaoba in subsequent scenes starts narrating many concocted stories separately to both the husband and wife against each other without the knowledge of the two. Believing Chaoba, both start suspecting each others’ integrity and their marriage is at stake. One day both burst out their un-spoken feelings and their home was literally transformed into a battlefield. In this midst Chaoba intervenes and tells the truth and also reminds them not to brush aside their old acquaintances, both persons and belongings when new ones come in. It is also a message to the people who are involved much in others’ business.

Another very popular Ipom is *Mongphamda shel thouba* (demanding the borrowed money on the graveyard of the dead debtor), which is full of a witty battle of words. One friend borrowed some money from the other friend and they come talking of it and suddenly the former runs away from the latter. He leaves one of his shoes on the way. Thinking that it was of no use to pick up the lone shoe the creditor then pursues the runaway debtor. After some distance he finds the other shoe of the same pair and takes it to the previous spot where the first shoe is. This way he takes time in an absurd to and fro journey, giving the other enough time to hide from him at his home. The debtor then tells his wife to act in mourning, while he lays there like a dead man covering himself with a white sheet of cloth. When the pursuer friend arrives panting, he finds his friend’s wife

\(^{414}\) Gathered form K. Achoubi who was the Nupi Shabi of this group. This *Ipom* was even performed in Delhi on the 23rd October, 1989.
mourning over the body. The wife tells him that his husband just arrived from a far away place with lots of money and suddenly he died. Suspecting her he asks for a knife. He then cries over his friend’s body pointing the knife just on him and asks where he kept the money. Fearful of his life the ‘dead’ friend suddenly springs up and confesses of his inability to clear the debt and admits to the lies he told to buy time. Apart from unraveling social facts the play was a medium of instant entertainment. This way these doyens entertained the people for more than two decades and today with the death of all the members except the Nupi Shabi (women impersonators or transvestites of this genre), this powerful genre also ceased its physical presence though the recorded audio cassettes and VCDs still keep the people’s mood lighter.

3. Third Phase: Local and Global


Globalization has become a very important and at the same time very much a vile term because of its implication of derailment of the subjectivity of the people who are globalized. The term has got its long history though the phenomenon it implies is not a new one. It appeared in the popular consciousness in 1920s in reference to the global trade and then in the 1940s and 50s with the popularity of global war. However, the image of globalization became clear with the photographs of the earth from the space in 1960s. It was further emphasized with the coinage of the phrase ‘global village’ by Marshall McLuhan in 1962. In 1960s the term globalization was used mainly in the context of the economy and business. But in 1990s it started to be used in academic circles. This is also

---

starting point of a counter movement against globalization, as there were proposals for ‘de-
globalization’ and ‘alternative globalizations’. 417 In order to find a well-leveled playing
field for all the players involved, both dominant ad subordinate, a marriage between the
global and local has been worked out. Robertson suggests the term ‘glocalization’ for the
phenomenon. 418

The taking up of global themes in Shumang Lila also is in tandem with taking up of
the local elements. Along with this the critical minds of theatre in the form of political and
social plays which directly address the local issues are still alive vibrantly. In the contrary
Shumang Lila engages itself in a different form of politics reflecting the changing political
outlook of the people. The previously popular theme of state versus people has given a
new shape which includes the insurgents. This is a sign of the gaining of freedom of
expression which, before, was one-sided and biased against the representatives of the state,
the security personnel. There is also vocal critique of the unwanted elements carried out by
the insurgents against the public. This does not discount the fact that there still are plays
showing the itching relationship between the state forces and the public. What this phase
registers is the triangular power relationship among state forces, insurgents, and the
suffering public who are sandwiched in the crossfire between the first two parties. Again
the drastically changing inter-community relationship between Meiteis, ‘Nagas’ and Kuki
following latter two’s desire to have their own sphere of political existence including
territorial separation, has also been a favoured theme of this phase. Now let us engage
ourselves in content analysis of some of these plays.

The new Millennium is welcomed by a play with an erupting theme. The play is
fittingly called *Meigi Ching* (Volcano) (2000) 419. The setting is the Naga, Kuki ethnic riot
in the early 1990s, which means there is dominance of the battleground scenes. Dilip is a

---

417 Mike Featherstone. op. cit. For further debates on Globalization and its facets see Axel Hulsemeyer (ed.).
2003 – *Globalization in the Twenty-First Century: Convergence or Divergence?* New York: Palgrave
Macmillan; Boaventura de Sousa Santos – Globalizations. In Mike Featherstone, Couze Venn, Ryan Bishop
and John Phillips (eds.). op. cit. p. 393; Anthony Giddens, 1990 – *The Consequences of Modernity.* Palo
Featherstone, Couze Venn, Ryan Bishop and John Phillips (eds.). op. cit. p. 405; Arjun Appadurai –
Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

see R. Robertson – Glocalization: Time-Space and Homogeneity-Heterogeneity. In M. Featherstone, S. Lash

419 Performed by Sanaleipak Nachom Artistes, directed by Birjit Ngangom, scripted by Dinesh Tongbram.
music directed by N. Ibomcha and Lyrics by Biramangol Mekola.
Manipur State police officer and the elder brother of Jiban who is an officer in Indian Army. Lucy is a Tangkhul Naga girl and Mery, a Kuki girl. Arthur Keishing is the father of Lucy. Somi is a Naga leader while Anthony is a Kuki leader and the brother of Mery. The two parties are in a bloody battle against each other, driven by the 'primordiality' of the ethnic jingoism, oblivious of the larger game played by the people in power, both 'legal' and 'illegal'. Jiban critiques the Indian state for its alleged role in fuming the backlash. The double talk of the state, which ‘emphasizes’ the national integration on the one hand and conspires with ‘divide and rule policy’ on the other hand, is exposed. Jiban is a Meitei and yet employed within the system of the Indian Army. He is caught between his emotional attachment with the sufferings of the two warring people, which defies the indifferent and objective approach of the Indian Army in general. Here is also a studied attempt to show the ‘benevolence’ of the Indian Army in its duty to stop the mayhem. The two brothers (read as Meitei in more community specific analysis) serve as mediators between Somi (Naga) and Anthony (Kuki). They are a symbol of communal harmony and universal human values as Dilip is married to Lucy and Dilip is in love with Mary. In this midst the wittily comic figure of Arthur, both in terms of accented Manipuri language and dress, symbolizes the innocence and vulnerability of a people not exposed to ‘civilization’. There is a subtle current of assimilation when he dresses up as a pure Hindu Meitei, of course in his effort to hide his identity from Kukis for his safety. When he is confronted with the urgency of probing his identity in the hand of Anthony, he tries to mimic the Meiteiness. Here Meiteiness has been associated with Hinduism when he starts counting and describing the names of Hindu gods and goddesses in parody. This parodying or secularizing of Krishna, Radha, Hanuman, Kali etc. is unimaginable in case of Meitei’s indigenous gods and goddesses. This may be read as the case where Hinduism is not, generally, firmly entrenched into the Meitei mind and ‘soul’ while the local deities are revered and feared, whose indignation would ‘cause’ their lives dearly. This also is a sign of liberal elements within Hinduism and the comparatively rigid structure of Meitei Dharma. Notwithstanding the above chaos, the ending of the play is happy when Meiteis who take the role of a big brother are able to successfully mediate between the two parties and bring normalcy.

This mediation from the side of Meiteis can be analyzed through the social contract theory of Lock, Hobbes and Rousseau. ‘Classic social contract theory and the broader
argument that, ideally, all social relations should take a contractual form, derive from a revolutionary claim. The claim is that individuals are naturally free and equal to each other, or that individuals are born free and born equal.\textsuperscript{420} In order to establish a social order where a group feeling is above the individuals, these free individuals came together in a contract. In one-way contract is also a way to find a consensus among the members involved. This forecloses man’s involvement in ‘freedom’ in the state of nature. If there is no restraint in the ‘freedom’ it would turn out to be a license to do whatever one wishes to, irrespective of what others feel about the action. Let me put this in the context of the above play. When there was ethnic crisis between two groups, the Nagas and the Kukis, there was no space for restraint. But the crisis needed a party, which was not biased against either of them. So, Meiteis tried to find out the middle path where the two warring groups could come and sort out their differences. So, there was a contract of a sort in this deal.

One of the most popular plays of this phase is \textit{Memsaheb-ki saree}\textsuperscript{421} (memsaheb’s saree) (2001). It is a romantic comedy, which is located partly in Manipur and partly in Pakistani Kashmir during the Kargil war. There is the introduction of a Pakistani woman, speaking Urdu, to Manipuri audience. Roshni is the daughter of Ranjan, an SP (Superintendent of Police). Sanathoi is a hill boy adopted as son by Ranjan after the ethnic clash between Naga and Kuki during 1992. He calls Roshni by the name of memsahib ever since he came to her home, as a gesture of respect. Romance starts blooming between the two like the blooming of mango flowers, mustard flowers etc. which they refer to as metaphor of their love. But this happiness is cut short when he, after becoming an officer in the Indian Army, is sent to Kargil for war between India and Pakistan. Micheal is the wing commander in Indian Air Force and son of an army officer. Mahesh is a navy officer in Indian Navy and the younger brother of Micheal. During the war Micheal gets himself parachuted on the Pakistan side after his plane crashes and incidentally meets Noor Jehan who treats him with medicine and love. Despite the knowledge that he was from the side of the enemy and also that her family has been eliminated by the Indian Army, she sidelines her bitterness and protects Micheal and saves him from the hands of the Pakistani soldiers. Overwhelmed by this selfless gesture Micheal takes her to Manipur and they get married.

\textsuperscript{420} Carole Pateman, 1988 – \textit{The Sexual Contract}. Cambridge: Polity Press. p. 39. The social contract theory, though, has its own shortcomings, especially seen from a feminist perspective. According to Pateman, in the original contract theory there was space for ‘sexual contract’ also, but this part was repressed.

\textsuperscript{421} Eshei Lila play, performed by Sanaleipak Nachom Artistes, scripted by Ibomcha Langpoklakpam, and directed by Birjit Ngangom. The audiocassette came out in 2001.
there. There she is assimilated to Manipuri culture. On the other hand nothing has been heard of Sanathoi after he hoisted the Indian national flag on the tip of Kargil Mountain. Assuming that he is dead, her father consoles Roshni and persuade her to get married to Mahesh. Dead opposed to this decision initially she gives in to the proposal as she wants to keep the promise given to Sanathoi that she would get married if he at all died in the battle field. But Sanathoi is still alive and comes home one fine day and excitingly hands over the gift, a saree to Roshni, oblivious of the fact that she is married. Roshni, being ecstatic to see her Sanathoi, forgets her marital status and wears the saree as fast as she can. But the consciousness starts dawning and she discloses the reality. Roshni is the medium of a woman who is caught in the hands of destiny and is also the model woman who is not guilty of her acts but a victim of unprecedented circumstances. This play is stitched in many themes, which seem to contradict each other. First is the outward flow of energy (giver to receive in return) i.e. the patriotism of Manipuris towards India, which may be explained as an endeavour of a marginalized people to be accepted by the dominant people and ideology. This may be a reflection of the thinking of common people or an ideal typical creation of one people and one country. Both of these are in stark contradiction to the agendas of the insurgents who are fighting for complete sovereignty from the Indian state. Here is also the subtle reading of the dissenting voices of the people against the ‘wayward’ insurgents. Second is the inward one (receiver), i.e. owning up of ‘other’ as its ‘self’. This is seen in how Noor Jehan, a Muslim, and an outsider, is assimilated to Hindu Meitei society.

The play *World Trade Centre*\(^{422}\) (2002) showcases the agony of the loss of basic human relationship in the aftermath of 11 September 2001 destruction of Twin Towers. Reshma is a Muslim woman from Afghanistan, married to Stephen, an American working in the Twin Towers, a symbol of a global convergence. Stephen is killed in the attack. Albert is the younger brother of Stephen and also an US army officer posted in Pentagon, the symbol of America’s power. He gets ready to avenge the national and personal loss in the hands of Bin Laden and sets out for Afghanistan. But the balancing act of rationality is provided by his father who alerts him about the intricacies involved in the war, including the human angle and the UNO’s Geneva Convention on war. The whole play revolves

---

\(^{422}\) Performed by Sanaleipak Nachom Aritistes, directed by Birjit Ngangom, scripted by Ranjit Ningthouja, music directed by N. Ibomcha and lyrics by Biramangol Mekola.
around the theme of terrorism, which has become a global phenomenon. Corollary to this is the human sufferings afflicted by this America’s war against terror which is given a global picture by this only superpower. This theme is adapted into Manipur milieu taking cognizance of the unrest and the culture of violence in her society. The Muslim characters are Afghans and yet Manipuris in the sense that the language and accent is that of the Meitei Pangals (Manipuri Muslims) who are also becoming very Islamic, slowly getting rid of the local social and cultural elements which are also shared by other communities in Manipur, particularly Meiteis. Other characters are Americans but there is a fond and dignified mention of Jupiter Yambem, a Manipuri who died in the attack. This is an attempt to show that the Manipuri Diaspora is slowly gaining its grounds around the world. In terms of music also there is an able attempt to recreate the Arabic tune whenever there is a scene of Afghanistan.

One family drama, *Eetinphamda Sambal*²²³ (fence in the rendezvous) (2002) based on a woman head of a family again reassures the importance of woman in the smooth running of a family. It shows how a woman can be a more responsible head of a family despite the presence of male members. Leipaklei (played by Robindro) is the elder sister of Pamheiba and Lanchenba. She brings up the two brothers and educates them by sending them outside Manipur after the death of their parents when she was at a tender age. For both the brothers she is not merely a sister but a ‘mother’ and they never go against her wish. (By now Robindro has established himself as the other name of ideal Manipuri woman, in the form of mother-in-law or sister-in-law or sister.) Both the brothers after their education get government jobs and get married. Leipaklei is a disciplinarian and traditionalist to the core. She teaches her two sisters-in-law, how to speak, how to address others and even how to dress up as they are married now. But the latter two are of different moulds and this, time to time, creates fissures in the family, which is made up by the tactful management of Leipaklei. While she is away on pilgrimage to Brindavan, the family gets separated with the instigation from others including the fathers of the two women. Finding her family fragmented when she comes back Leipaklei is tremendously saddened and gives the members a fine verbal lashing for doing the unacceptable. As the two brothers regard her as everything the world could give, they regret the happenings and

---
²²³ Eshei Lila play, performed by Naharol Khongthang Aritistes Association, scripted by Manaobi M.M. and directed by Birjit Ngangom.
finally the family is united. This play also showcases the rising public visibility of a group of effeminate men (transvestites and homosexuals) in today’s Manipur through the character of Tombinou. He is the figure of both amusement and sometimes contempt. The other side of transvestism is shown when he becomes a Maibi giving oracles.424

Transvestism in most of the societies has been understood in conjunction with homosexuality. However, the term transvestism is implicated in the dimorphic gender divide between male and female which negates the possibility of having another gender than these two. There has been debate, in the academic circle, of possibility of finding ‘third sex’ and ‘third gender’ in societies.425 For instance the ‘berdache’ of Native North American Indian communities, who changes his/her gender (not the sex), has a unique status other than just male or female. He is backed by cultural ontology, which is legitimizied by the widespread origin myth etc. They are given a spiritual status in their society.426 Nevertheless, the phenomenon of transvestism is almost universal. The term 'transvestite' was invented by the German sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld to address both the heterosexual and homosexual cross-dressing persons in 1910.427

It has been studied that exclusive association of transvestism with homosexuality is not a universal phenomenon. In Philippines, there is differentiation between the feminine male homosexuals who are transvestites and masculine male homosexuals. The transvestite homosexuals control the homosexual organizations where the masculine ones are not that forthcoming. 'Bayot' is the general term for all homosexuals or may imply transvestite homosexuality. 'Swards' are the middle class homosexuals and they sometimes address the lower class ones as bayots.428 There is also dissociation of transvestism and couvades in many societies where couvades are practiced. According to Robert L. Munroe, ‘There are, however, several aspects of the couvades that differentiate it markedly from male transvestism. In a couvade-practicing society, all fathers are expected to observe the appropriate ritual taboos and other activities, but in societies in which transvestism is institutionalized, the incidence is always low and seldom rises above two to three percent

424 It will be shown in Chapter VI how actors often represent the femininity in complex ways.
428 Ibid. pp.76-78.
of the male population."\textsuperscript{429} So, there is a negative association between transvestism and couvades. C.G. Jung studied the androgynous personality phenomenon. For him the psyche is constituted by a masculine and a feminine component, which he called as ‘animus’ and ‘anima’ respectively.\textsuperscript{430}

In Manipuri society, there is a visible trend of homosexuals coming out in the public sphere with assertive claims. They are into transvestism, despite the mixed response, mostly negative but also positive and indifferent, from the society. In fact Shumang Lila has also taken this phenomenon to its fold and started recruiting some artistic male homosexuals to be Nupi Shabis (‘male actresses’) i.e. to play female characters. It is a conscious effort from the troupe who performed the play \textit{Eetinphamda Sambal}, which I discussed above, to select a regular comedian to play the character of a male transvestite. This characterization is done because the regular Nupi Shabis of the troupe would not suit the character as they have been playing female characters not transvestites (this is in opposition to the real life of those homosexual and transvestite performers). So, a non-Nupi Shabi artiste was selected for the role.

The next play of importance is 21st Century-gi Kunti\textsuperscript{431} (Kunti of 21st Century) (2003). It is a high drama of modernity and tradition; present and past temporality; insiders and outsiders, all located in women who are the repository of societal norms and antiquity. As the name suggests, the play drives on the main character Rajluxmi (played by Oinam Arun) who is the modern metaphor of Kunti of the Mahabharata, who had a son Karna before she got married to Pandu. This hidden liaison which comes out to the fore is the tag of the play. Rajluxmi is sent to Delhi for her higher education. Then she comes back to Manipur and gets married to Sanajaoba, also an ‘outsider’ educated and a highly placed government officer, as their parents wish. Her mother, Jandhavi (played again by Robindro) is an educated traditionalist who believes in the sati dharma of wives, even

\textsuperscript{431} Eshei Lila play, performed by Peace Maker Artistes Association, scripted by Manaobi M.M. and directed by Birjit Ngangom.
though she has been exposed to the modern mode of living and thinking. When Rajluxmi wants to share her past with Sanajaoba, he ignores it and assures her that he is never interested in her past. Since then she has been single-mindedly devoted to her husband as ‘ishwar’ (treating him as Lord), burying her past. She also becomes a government officer holding high office. (The modern woman is visibly exemplified in Manipur by where they are located, by what they dress and how they dress. So, an office employed woman is considered to be the one who knows the world. To differentiate them from the rest their choice of dress is saree-full, the Indian style saree, mostly for the office going purpose, as different from the Manipuri style half-saree. This is also reflected in the play when Rajluxmi and Mrinalini, the other female character, dress in saree-full.) So, the family has a smooth and peaceful stint with the birth of two sons till Arjun comes in to their lives. With this the past of Rajluxmi starts unfolding leaf by leaf where she is marked by a tormenting psychological trauma. Arjun is the father of a son born out of the relationship he had with Rajluxmi when they were pursuing higher education in Delhi. He is a Punjabi whose family settled down at Imphal but had shifted to Amritsar. He is here to take Rajluxmi to his parents oblivious of the fact that she is now married to another man. She is stuck with surprise and disbelief to see him and confesses that she cannot go along with him as he is now a wife and daughter-in-law. She snaps the relationship of a husband and wife between her and Arjun but she never eludes from the fact that she is the mother of their son, her first son. This is the emphasis on the reality of how a mother can never disown her child. Here Arjun, an outsider is shown in a positive shade with his devotion to the lady he loves and his ideal principle of life.

When Rajluxmi’s past is known by everybody, her mother, her husband, her father-in-law and her acquaintances, they all try to label her as promiscuous and even described her as a prostitute. Here there is an address to the prejudice of the ‘low morality’ of the Manipuri women in the eyes of the outsiders, as being the creation of some wayward girls who go outside the state for education and otherwise. There is the assumption in the minds of the majority of people of the state that all the girls residing outside live a carefree and ‘modern’ life doing away with all the inhibitions the society has. So, there is an overdrawn comparison of ‘modernity’ and ‘tradition’ which are carried by them and the girls who

432 Half-saree, roughly the half of the full-length saree of nine yards is worn over the Phanek mayek naibi, the horizontally stripped phanek (sarong type female dress).
remain in the state respectively. This, initially, is also the understanding of her mother about Rajluxmi. She now is the object of suspicion and undergoes harsh tests of chastity in the hands of her husband who was not initially interested in knowing her past. He remains stubborn to keep the patriarchal grace of a husband, in the face of the society and is not ready to pardon her and threatens her to get divorced even after knowing the truth. Her father-in-law also disowns her. But she is still determined to convince them to save the marriage no matter how low she is kept in the family, forgetting the fact that she is also a highly posted government officer. So, Kunti of the Mahabharata got a son from the sun out of ignorance, but Kunti of the 21st Century gets him very much willingly, though both the relationships are disapproved by society. This is the bottom-line. Even when the ‘modern’ Kunti turns into a keeper of tradition, people harp on the very digression committed by her in her past forgetting all her present goodness. But there is a difference between the two Kuntis, the Kunti of the epic is biased against Karna, her eldest son when she asks for his index finger (which is instrumental for a good archer) for the safety of her other five sons with the instigation of Shree Krishna. The Kunti of the 21st Century does not carry the baggage of bias but loves her sons equally and unfortunately is the victim of suspicion and prejudice. This play is an effort to construct Manipuri women as the vehicle of societal norms whose ‘waywardness’ is the cause of anxiety of the wider society. The 21st century Kunti is a Manipuri Kunti who is caught between tradition and the nascent modernity.

In terms of ‘inter-cultural’ exchange, the new version of Devdas (2003) is an attempt to introduce Sharatchandra Chattopadhyay’s description of the Bengali milieu, to the Manipuri audience. It is a tragedy of a highest kind, woven through the trial and tribulation of relationship between lovers, the opposition of their love by their parents who are well embedded in the strong hierarchical social structure. These elements are universal which are well suited in Manipuri milieu. Apart from this the play has not tried to make the characters Manipuris but they remain as Bengali only, both in terms of costumes and dialogue. There is also a visible sign of the influence of the recent Bollywood Devdas of Sanjay Lila Bhanshali (Shah Rukh Khan, Aishwarya Rai and Madhuri Dixit). This can be read as an attempt by Shumang Lila to introduce Bengali culture to the audience but there is a disjuncture between the audience and the characters when the former is not completely able to identify with the latter. Moreover there are spaces of much improvement in terms of

433 Performed by Sanaleipak Nachom Artistes.
the direct implantation of the Bengali characters. This may serve as dislocation of the whole production, where it is left hanging, not able to locate it either here or there.

Next play of this millennium, which drives completely on the foreign theme and form, is the *Lidice-gi Gulap* (The Rose of Lidice) (2004). It is a fictionalized historical play contextualized in the war between Russia and Germany during World War II and on how the people of a serene village called Lidice in the present day Czech Republic, then a part of Soviet Union, were butchered by Hitler’s soldiers in one night. It is also the clear reflection of how women are dragged into the traumatic twists and turns of war. Silky (elder sister, played by R.K. Sanaton Singh) and Milky are two sisters who grow up in the lap of nature which grace their village. Though the characters are foreign they are indigenized like any Manipuri village girls to give a local flavour, like the playful language used in their conversations. Boris (played by Gokul) is an officer of the Soviet’s Red Army, who comes to the village to confront the advancing German army. Boris and Silky fall in love and get married. But the moment of union turns into that of separation with the stroke of time when he has to report for the duty to face the invading Germans on that very night. This is the night when all the villagers are eliminated except Silky who lives to bear the pangs the whole of her life. Boris is also reported to be killed in the battle. This is the time of self-judgment whether the life is worth living for her. After the war is over the village is turned into a mass grave embellished with the rose plants, the symbol of love, brought from different places of the world and there Silky is taking care of them as the watch woman of love and peace. She is the rose of Lidice. On one of the anniversaries she sees the ‘dead’ Boris (who was jailed in Germany) walking up to her and calling out her name. That is the moment of disbelief, ecstasy and union of the two lovers. The play can perfectly be contextualized in Manipur where the same emotional trauma and anxiety are faced by those women whose sons, brothers and husbands have been thrown into the political crisis. In addition to this, women (both of the play and Manipur) are the victims of the excesses committed by the instruments of the state in a militarized environment.

One play which addresses the growing trend of alternative sexuality in Manipuri society and the responses by the latter is *Natongchabigi Basanta* (2004). The two women protagonists have a very intense same sex relationship. This is vehemently opposed by

---

434 Eshei Lila play, performed by Sanaleipak Nachom Artistes, scripted by Ranjit Ningthouja and directed by O. Prafulchandra.

their parents. Despite this they decide to get married dispelling all the attempts by their parents. The woman character taking the feminine partner even attempts to commit suicide. However their individuality is not able to prevail over the communitarian edicts. The ending comes with a final resolution where they are married to their male husbands, giving no ground for speculation in the mind of the audience. This is also an indicator of the constructionist interpretation where ‘homosexuality’ is seen as a condition driven by one’s social location rather than the essentialist interpretation that it is a genetic phenomenon. In the sidelines of this main theme of the play there is the visibility of a vocal critique of the interference of the insurgents in the daily existence of the people.

In line with this latter theme is *Gusmaogi Khudol–East Timor* (Gusmao’s Gift–East Timor) (2005-06)\textsuperscript{436}, based on the freedom struggle of the insurgents under the leadership of Xanana Gusmao in East Timor against the colonization by Indonesia. The selection of this theme is also important as there is apt similarity between the case of East Timor and Manipur. The play is a critical engagement on the whole dynamics of a struggling people, starting from the direct confrontation between the insurgents and the dominant power; the frustration of the insurgent groups because of the long, constant, and tiring confrontation; the politics among these splintered groups; the disenchantment of the people with these groups which are slowly diverting from their main objective and engaging in their own ends etc. This facet of mushrooming of groups in the name of insurgency and the disunity brought through this process is aptly addressed by the character of Gusmao’s mother. She emphasizes the inevitability of success with integrity. This is a direct address to the local insurgent groups. How the people are struck with this feeling is visible from the round of applause from the audiences who are unable to speak out for fear of being ‘punished’ or even losing their lives. This precisely is the functional role of theatre in society, which gives a time for the people to ponder upon their acts. Though the play is located in East Timor the theme is contextualized in Manipur. It finds a safer way when the performers are confronted by the insurgents on their freedom of speech. They, in turn, may say that the play is on East Timor not on Manipur. The whole play is an introduction to the audience of the similar cases of Manipur present in different parts of the world, bringing in the inter-cultural understanding.

\textsuperscript{436} Performed by Peacemaker Artistes Association, directed by Birjit Ngangom, scripted by Ranjit Ningthouja. East Timor had been under Portuguese colonization for four hundred years till 1974. In 1975 Indonesia captured it and kept under it for 24 years. In June 1999, Indonesia agreed to give East Timor its much sought-after vote on autonomy. The United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET) took it over in October 1999 and East Timor elected an 88 member Parliament in August of 2001. The first-ever presidential elections were held in April 2002, and the country became fully independent in May 2002. In September 2002, it became the 191st member of UNO.
After analyzing some of the plays on ‘inter-culturalism’ we now may turn into another form of this process, i.e. the increasing exposure of Shumang Lila to other parts of India. This is a significant step towards the ‘inter-cultural’ dialogue, at least among the theatre observing public. This also is an introduction to the outsiders of Manipur of the existence of a different genre of theatre other than Ratan Thiyam’s and Kanhaiyalal’s, and Rasa Lila. *Memsaheb ki saree*, was performed in cities like Kerala, Kolkata, Mumbai (2001), under the aegis of IPTA. The play was well received by the local people wherever it went, showing the willingness to experience other culture in their own locality. *Meigi ching* was performed in Meghdoot theatre in 2000, as part of the annual Festival of NSD (National School of Drama), Bharat Rang Mahotsav. The response to the play or Shumang Lila could be adjudged from the house full attendance of the audience. This was accentuated by the presence of Ratan Thiyam who introduced Shumang Lila play for the first time in this annual festival. Also Shumang Lila plays have been a regular feature in the annually held Northeast Festival at Pragati Maidan, New Delhi.

Now we may engage ourselves in the analysis of the terms ‘culturism’, ‘inter-culturism’, ‘intra-culturism’, and ‘multiculturism’ taking into account the above studied cases. Culturalism according to Arjun Appadurai’s theorization is ‘the conscious mobilization of cultural differences in the service of a larger national or international politics’.

Interculturalism, according to Bharucha is ‘interactions and borrowings across cultures’. The ‘word remains,..., immersed within the actual practices not merely of understanding other cultures (more specifically, outside one’s national boundaries), but of interacting with them. Bharucha critiques Richard Schechner who started using the word in place of ‘internationalism’ in 1970s to describe his avant-garde performances. His critique is that Schechner’s usage of the concept lies in its ‘naïve...embrace of the cultures of the world, with insufficient regard for their social, economic, and political contexts.’ While emphasizing the workability of ‘interculturalism’ than internationalism Schechner asserts that ‘the real exchange of importance to artists was not that among nations, which really suggests official exchanges and artificial kinds of boundaries, but the exchange among cultures, something which could be done by individuals or by non-official groupings, and it doesn’t obey national boundaries.’ Bharucha’s contention is that Schechner’s assertion assumes ‘nations’ as official and ‘cultures’ as ‘assumedly free’ and emphasizes the role of ‘nation-state’ in such

---

438 Bharucha. op. cit. p. 5.
439 Ibid.
440 Ibid.
exchange. He still is of the view that ‘national’ should not be done away with especially to sustain the resisting voices inside the nation to counter the ‘global’. The reverse is dangerous because ‘the ‘global’ is subsumed within an uncritical acceptance of the modes, mechanisms and agencies that constitute First World affluence’. So, in the interculturalism what should be kept in mind are the authenticity of the cultural element, which are picked up, and the sentiments of the people from whom the cultural products originate. Intraculturalism, according to Bharucha, ‘refers more pertinently to the difference that exists within the boundaries of a particular region in what is assumed to be a homogenized culture (‘Kannada culture, ‘Bengali culture’)’. He is of the view that ‘intra’ carries more criticality in understanding the actual practices by the people while ‘multiculturalism’ has a hidden agenda. Asserting the case of India he asserts, ‘while the ‘intra’ prioritizes the interactivity and translation of diverse cultures, the ‘multi’ upholds a notion of cohesiveness that is based on ... ‘5000 years of uninterrupted civilization’.

The question of boundary is specified in Bharucha’s understanding of the above concepts. In interculturalism, national is not discounted. He seems to be agreeing Schechner’s definition of the concept minus the official and nonofficial bifurcation of culture. In intraculturalism definition he fixes culture within the boundary of a region (geographical). This means Manipuri culture is confined within the boundary of Manipur or specifically the valley. This sounds little erroneous given the fact that Manipuri culture is distributed beyond the boundary of Manipur, i.e. to Assam, Bangladesh, Tripura, Myanmar and Delhi, if we include the diaspora. So, when Shumang Lila is involved in intracultural dialogue it takes into account these Manipuri people in different regions sharing the primordial elements of language, culture, and even food habit. The presence of a critiquing Shumang Lila has been registered in this chapter as an intracultural exercise. When it comes to the intercultural dialogue the same understanding of Manipuri culture is kept in mind when it contrasts with Bengali, East Timorese, American, Afghan cultures etc. One assumed benefit of Shumang Lila, when it comes to intercultural themes, is its confinement of performances, mostly, within Manipur, reducing the possibility of the authenticity of the represented foreign culture to be judged by the outsiders in general and the people of the originating culture in particular. It does not mean that the performances are not countered by critiques from the side of well-informed observers in the audiences. So, what makes Shumang Lila a living art form is its penchant for critical engagement within and between cultures.

441 Ibid. p. 11.
442 Ibid. p. 12.