CHAPTER III

“ART SURROUNDED BY STRIFE”: VIOLENCE AND THEATRE
“Art Surrounded by Strife”: Violence and Theatre

Tayenjam Bijoykumar Singh, who has translated three Manipuri plays by Ratan Thiyam into English (*Manipur Trilogy*), summarises the state of affairs of present day Manipur in an article entitled “Ratan Thiyam’s Silent War on War” in the following words:

... the story of present day Manipur, an erstwhile ‘Little Paradise’ turned into ‘Killing Field’. Guns are fired, bombs are exploded, people are killed, protests are made, processions are carried out, strikes are called, economic blockades are imposed, etc., etc., but life goes on. Social organisations mushroom to fight injustice. Public leaders shout and promise heaven but do precious nothing for the oppressed people of the State. Wails echo in the air deafening the ears but those at the helm of power and in responsible positions turn a deaf ear... The common people continue to suffer. (2)

Ratan Thiyam returned to his native state Manipur soon after his graduation from National School of Drama in 1974, and set up his now famous Chorus Repertory Theatre at the outskirts of Imphal in 1976 with a mission to evolve, as he says to Erin B. Mee in an interview, “an indigenous theatrical idiom, employing the arts and culture of Manipur.” (Mee, 223). However, he discovered himself in such an atmosphere of turmoil as accounted by T. B. Singh. As a matter of fact, he was greatly disturbed by the self-destructing course of unrest and violence prevailed over his beloved land Manipur.

Ratan Thiyam, being a sensible human and a conscientious artist, cannot hide his face like an ostrich and remains insensitive to the happenings around him. For him, any work of art that cannot feel the society and touch the inner self, is of no value. He
firmly believes that art represents time. The representative warranty of art, however, does not necessarily make it an imperative for the artists to transform their art into activism or artists to become activists themselves, yet art remains a powerful response to the contemporary experience of existence. He significantly observes in an interview with Ravindran and Saple:

In fact, art has always been surrounded by strife – one cannot escape from that. Human beings cannot break away from conflict. So this conflict will automatically manifest itself on stage. (np.)

Violence at present is no longer a sporadic incident particular to a place, it has become a very common phenomenon around the world. Thiyam’s experience of violence alerts him to a “feeling that something, somewhere has gone wrong” which he “constantly experience[s] as an artist.”(in Ravindran and Saple). Therefore his art is a result of an equally powerful response, a “volcanic eruption” that always takes place inside him which gets translated “into art on stage”:

There is always a volcanic eruption taking place inside me – and that can translate into art on stage. (ibid.)

When asked to elaborate on his own view that violence in the modern world disturbs the artist in him, Thiyam again says to Pallavi Kharade of Daily Bhaskar in the same vein:

Art deals with peace and aesthetics. It deals with a quiet journey. The artist is never attracted towards violence or materialistic aspects. So I get disturbed whenever I come across violence and it reflects in most of my plays. I have plays against war such as Chakravyuha. My question is, if we go on playing the game of violence then what are we leaving for our younger generation? A dark age or beautiful garden of truth and peace? We have to make a choice. (np.)
Violence, therefore, is one of the most abiding features in most of his plays which include *Urubhangam* (*Broken Thigh*, an adaptation of Bhasha’s *Urubhangam*); *Karnabham* (*The Burden of Karna*, an adaptation of Bhasha’s *Karnabharam*); *Chakravyuha*, (*The Wheel of War*) 1984; *Uttar Priyadarshi*, (*The Final Beauteitude*, by Hindi playwright Agyeya), 1996; *Hey Nungshibi Prithivi*, (*My Earth, My Love*) 2004; *Chinglon Mapan Tampak Ama*, (*Nine Hills One Valley*) 2007; *Wahoudok*, (*Prologue*) 2008 etc.

As a playwright, Thiyam has been intensely aware of the ubiquitous spoor of violence that characteristically marked day to day reality of Manipur as well as every nook and corner of the world. He is apprehensive of the possibility of a future for the humane existence of mankind should the present trend of violence continue unabated. While speaking about *Uttar Priyadarshi*, a play about Emperor Ashoka’s transformation from militarism to Buddhism, he ruefully confides:

Frankly speaking, I am fed up with violence. I can’t take any more…But where are we standing now? . . . Can we predict a better future for ourselves? Are we trying to imagine that when the present situation continues where will we be in the next century? (*Oriental Times*, n.p)

René Girard, celebrated literary critic and cultural theorist, while theorising violence, speaks of the mechanism that engenders conflict and violence in societies. From his study of history, mythology and novels, Girard has explored the relationship between mimetic desire, violence and sacrifice in his seminal works like *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* (1966), *Violence and the Sacred* (1977) and *The Scapegoat* (1986). However, the most convenient and useful single summary of his mimetic model is his essay “Mimesis and Violence: Perspectives in Cultural Criticism” which appeared in the
now defunct Berkshire Review 14 (1979) and reprinted in The Girard Reader edited by James G. Williams (1996). Girard begins his theory with the concept desire which, according to him, is a common human trait. This desire becomes destructive and the root cause of violence in society because it is usually “mimetic”. That is, human behaviour is based on “mimesis”; at the same time, human beings try to acquire and appropriate the object of mimesis, a process which Girard calls “acquisitive mimesis” (Girard 1966). According to his explanation, one learns to desire for an object from a model who desires the object. This model is at first a mentor, but if desire is imitated successfully, the mentor becomes a rival. The rivalry between the model and the rival is the mimetic rivalry. In Girard’s words:

If the tendency to imitate appropriation is present on both sides, imitative rivalry must tend to become reciprocal ... In other words, the individual who first acts as a model will experience an increase in his own appropriative urge when he finds himself thwarted by his imitator. And reciprocally. Each becomes the imitator of his own imitator and the model of his own model. Each tries to push aside the obstacle that the other places in his path. Violence is generated by this process; or rather violence is the process itself when two or more partners try to prevent one another from appropriating the object they all desire through physical or other means. (1979, 9)

That is, they soon become “doubles” for each other – model and rival, as they both continue to imitate the rising intensity of each other.

Mimetic rivalry can soon become acquisitive rivalry. Acquisitive rivalry, that is, the struggle for the same object of desire soon becomes conflictual rivalry, a situation where the opponents forget the object of desire, but the focus is on winning it over the other, and on their mutual hostility. Bruce Chilton summarises Girard’s analysis in the following words:
mimetic desire is a threat to the very existence of human society because its natural conclusion is the displacement (that is, the destruction) of the other who is both model and rival. The desire to have what the other has (even to the point of wishing to be what the other is), a basic, human passion, is the root of violence: it is both ineluctable and incompatible with the existence of human culture. (18)

However, the question arises here is how an individual’s desire for an object can become the desire of the community. Girard explains:

As an object becomes the focus of mimetic rivalry between two or more antagonists, other members of the group tend to join in, mimetically attracted by the presence of mimetic desire. Mimesis is mimetically attractive, and we can assume that at certain stages, at least in the evolution of human communities, mimetic rivalry can spread to an entire group. This is what is suggested by the acute disorder phase with which many rituals begin. The community turns into a mob under the effect of mimetic rivalry. The phenomena that take place when a human group turns into a mob are identical to those produced by mimetic rivalry, and they can be defined as that loss of differentiation which is described in mythology and re enacted in ritual. (1979, 11)

Once the level of conflictual rivalry is reached, violence may burst out between the model and the rival. Girard says:

Violence is thus generated. Violence is not originary; it is a by-product of mimetic rivalry. Violence is mimetic rivalry itself becoming violent as the antagonists who desire the same object keep thwarting each other and desiring the object all the more. Violence is supremely mimetic. (ibid. 11-12)

Conflictual rivalry can destroy a human community as rivals begin more and more to resemble each other and members of the community look to one another as models for their desires. At this point, when violence remains unabated and on the verge of destroying the whole community, the members rediscover the object of their original
desire and search for a substitute on whom to redirect their destructive energy in order to mitigate the violence and save the community. “When unappeased, violence seeks and always finds a surrogate victim”. (Girard 1977, 2)

The search for a substitute, that is, bringing into being a scapegoat is the second important step in Girard’s theory of violence. From acquisitive mimesis and rivalry originates all violence (Girard 1966) and from the surrogate victim originates ritual as ameliorative factor for violence (Girard 1977). This scapegoat is, according to Girard, an arbitrary victim:

The creature that excited fury is abruptly replaced by another, chosen only because it is vulnerable and close at hand. (1977, 2)

And now the victim will be murdered collectively and peace will be restored. Rituals that follow will transpose the event from murder to sacrifice. People and societies originally engaged in this “scapegoat mechanism” from which originates myth and rituals of sacrifice. In Bruce Chilton’s view:

Sacrifice is the symptom of communal violence and—at the same time—the means by which society attempts to conceal and avert violence. The violence of society is imputed to a person or animal who is the sacrificial victim. The ritual act of killing that victim, which is then deified in view of the killing's apparently beneficial effect upon society, both restrains and assuages the communal violence which is at its root. (18)

In the given context of the history of Manipur, violence in the plays of Ratan Thiyam can be viewed from a Girardian perspective. In one of his world acclaimed plays, Chakravyuha, Thiyam succinctly narrates the mechanism of violence through highly allegorical language. Despite the mythic content of the play, it is an enactment of the present crisis of Manipur where individuals are routinely reduced into inescapable
victims. Lots of young people are being allured to suicidal acts in the name of heroism, patriotism and martyrdom. About the play Thiham says:

It is a conflict between two generations. The Saptarathis, (Seven Charioteers), represent the system and its strength pitted against the individual. Chakravyuha, is the outcome of a protest against violence, against what happened in the World-War II, and a threat of World War III, a threat the younger generation faces. (Rajendra Paul, 2006. Qtd. in Pinak S. Bhattacharya, n.p.)

Chakravyuha dramatises the entrapment and killing of Abhimanyu, the young son of Arjuna and Subhadra by the Saptarathis in the holy war of Kurukshetra. The episode is taken from Chapters 34-40 of the Seventh Book of the Mahabharata. The central issue of the great epic is the dynastic struggle between the Kauravas and the Pandavas for the throne of Hastinapur. The rivalry between them began when Yudhishtira, the eldest of the Pandavas was declared the crown prince whereas Duryudhana, the eldest of the Kauravas coveted the throne. The rivalry culminates in the great battle of Kurukshetra.

The root cause of the war of Kurukshetra around which the great epic is built is desire. To be more precise, it is the desire for the throne of Hastinapur on the part of both the Kauravas and the Pandavas. A throne symbolizes power and eventual material possession. In the Prologue of Chakravyuha, the Sutradhara says:

In this modern battlefield on the holy plains of Kurukshetra the power game has already started. This is a war of flags . . . This is a war of power grabbers . . . (10)

Even Abhimanyu who lays down his life at a tender age, avers during his last journey to heaven after his death:
O great Kings and emperors of this world, ensconced under canopies of power, those canopies were given to you as shields to protect truth from the blistering acid of sinful lies. But you have polluted this fair and pure earth with your blind egos and criminal use of power . . . (ibid. 51)

The desire for the throne can be called, in Girardian terminology, “mimetic” as it is destructive and the cause of violence. The consequent mimetic rivalry between the Kauravas and the Pandavas leads to acquisitive rivalry as both the camps employ both fair and foul means to acquire the throne. The epic battle of Kurukshetra is the manifestation of the stage of conflictual rivalry between them. The war has already lasted for twelve days without any outcome. Many great warriors from both the camps have already fallen in the battlefield. Still there seems no end to the war unless both the camps are completely destroyed.

At this juncture of conflictual rivalry, there arises a need to search for a scapegoat to be sacrificed to end the violence in order to save the community. Abhimanyu is the collectively chosen victim. At a rather symbolic level, even the Kauravas chose him when they decided to build the chakravyuha to annihilate the enemy and to keep Arjuna away from the battlefield with the help of a conspiracy because only Arjuna knew the trick of destroying the chakravyuha. Abhimanyu has allegorically been represented as a surrogate victim or a scapegoat collectively persecuted ironically both by the Pandavas and the Kauravas with the ambition to achieving the end of the strife. This collectively chosen scapegoat Abhimanyu is, in Girardian sense, an arbitrary victim. He has no direct bearing on the war, or the outcome of the war in the sense that he would probably never be able to ascend to the throne of Hastinapur for which the war is on. Even crooked Sakuni, the maternal uncle
of the Kauravas and one of the Saptarathis, seeing the impending death of Abhimanyu inside the chakravyuha, accuses Janardana Krishna, the chief architect of the war:

I fear that your game plan may take an evil turn and poison the blameless life of Uttara and Abhimanyu. “I fear for Abhimanyu’s life . . . No . . . No. O Krishna . . . You cannot do this even though you are a God . . . No, I say, no, you cannot do this. (ibid. 44)

Sakuni’s contention that both Uttara and Abhimanyu’s life is “blameless” is suggestive of their non-involvement with the cause of the war, that is the desire for the throne.

However, Abhimanyu as a victim is not totally arbitrary in the sense that he is a member of the community involved in the violence. He is the son of the third Pandava, the great warrior Arjuna, and Lord Krishna’s sister Subhadra is his mother. He considers the honour and prestige of his father and the dynasty as his own. He resolves to enter the vyuha with the following words:

Like the insect that jumps into the wild fire, I will leap on the army deployed by Dronacharya. Though I may be young and alone, I swear to kill all the major and minor charioteers of the enemy force to save the honour of the dynasty of my parents. (ibid. 35-36)

Though he is a member of the community, he has some traits which make him different from other members of the community. He is of tender age, a mere fifteen year old lad – often referred to as a child in the play – to be involved in such an epic warfare. Despite his young age, he has acquired all the skills and tactics of war. Above all, he is as valiant and strong a warrior as his father and his uncles. Even he knows how to enter the chakravyuha though he may not know how to come out of it. Such exceptional brilliance makes him vulnerable to be chosen as a scapegoat to be sacrificed in the war.
He has actually been tempted to lay down his life via flattery. Even when he says that he does not know the way out of the *chakravyuha*, Yudhishthira, the eldest *Pandava*, himself entices him like this:

> O my son Abhi (*embraces him*), you are so daring, so brave. I am pleased. (ibid. 28)

Again:

> O Abhimanyu, O valiant warrior . . . try and penetrate the *vyuha* by whatever means you know . . . Remember you are as valiant and expert at arms as your father. (ibid. 35)

And Abhimanyu succumbs to the entreaties of the *Pandavas* led by Yudhishthira in spite of knowing his impending death inside the *chakravyuha*. He has been collectively persecuted – physically by the *Kauravas* and symbolically by the *Pandavas*.

As a matter of fact, scapegoat/sacrifice motif pervades the whole play from the very beginning. The Prologue of the play, the flag bearers’ song which describes the battlefield of Kurukshetra ends like this:

> In this Mahayagna [a great sacrificial ceremony],
> With the great sacrificial rites of grappling for power,
> We all become the offering.
> The great power-hunters have already let loose
> Their Ashwamedha horse for sacrifice. (ibid. 11)

In Sc V of the play, the four soldiers who are challenging Abhimanyu when he tries to enter the *vyuha* after shattering its entrance laugh at him:

> Aye! You Abhimanyu, the sacrificial goat of the Pandavas entering the Chakravyuha, alight from your chariot. We will pierce your chest with a spear and turn you into a pool of blood. Ha! You child! (ibid. 42)
Sakuni too understands that Abhimanyu is made a sacrificial victim by the Pandavas and by Lord Krishna Himself. He pleads to Krishna:

But Oh! Janardana Krishna, why have you done this? Why have you flown with Arjuna and left behind this innocent child, when you know that the war against the truth has already begun inside this Chakravyuha? (ibid. 43)

Abhimanyu himself realises the futility and treachery involved in scapegoat mechanism. In the Epilogue of the play, dead Abhimanyu on his way to his heavenly abode, broods over the meaning of his sacrifice and wonders whether he is a scapegoat or a martyr. In a very poignant final speech, he ponders:

Adieu, O mother earth. And you humans full of carnal desires, jealousy and corruption. I am on my last journey after completing my duties on earth . . . I set out on this last journey with an unanswered question in my heart—am I a scapegoat or am I a martyr? (ibid.51)

Abhimanyu’s question on the way to heaven discursively problematizes the paradox of violence. This is the question, Ratan Thiyam says, “every soldier in the US or Iraq or Afganistan or anywhere asks himself, and that of every young separatist who is fighting for a cause that is not his.” (to Ravindran and Saple, 2009)

However, the end of the war and the envisaged peace at the cost of Abhimanyu’s life is never achieved. Girard proposes that peace achieved by scapegoating process is not lasting, nor is it ethical. The death of the scapegoat eventually engenders fresh phase of violence (Jeramy Townsley, np.). After Abhimanyu’s death, the war continues with more vigour and intensity for another five days till the complete annihilation of both the camps. At the end of the war, all the Kauravas perish and on the victorious side, only the five Pandavas survive. In the words of Diana Culbertson:
Mimetic desire continues to be the fundamental dynamism of human interaction. Mimetic rivalry continues to dominate human beings in their relations with one another, and violence continues to escalate. (40)

While Girard considers mimetic desire as a prime source of violence, postmodernist thinkers like Elie Kedourie, Partha Chatterjee, and Alfred Cobban see nationalism and nation state as one of the most powerful factors of violence and destruction in the modern world (E. San Juan, Jr. 1). In the essay “Nationalism, the Postcolonial State and Violence” San Juan, Jr points out:

Typically described in normative terms as a vital necessity of modern life, the nation-state has employed violence to accomplish questionable ends. Its disciplinary apparatus is indicted for committing unprecedented barbarism.” (1)

He further says that post modernist analysis of the nation finds out the source of evil in its ideological nature. It regards the nation as the source of identity for modern individuals. Nationality means citizenship or national belonging for an individual which is a political affiliation. Nation, which is founded on socially constructed myths and traditions, is posited as a normal state of affairs used to legitimize the control and domination of one group over the other. That is, violence which erupts as a consequence of such control and domination, is an expression of physical force used by a state and is legitimized by the people or nation. Violence, in fact, destroys a normative state of affairs. From the postcolonial point of view, the nation state and its ideology of nationalism are alleged to have become the chief source of violence and conflict.

According to San Juan, the post modernist or postcolonial critics seem to forget that nation is a creation of the modern capitalist state. Making a historical analysis of violence and maintaining the distinction between nation state and nationalism, he opines
that the rise of nation states coincided with wars and the establishment of military bureaucratic machine. The state refers to the political institution with centralised authority occurring at the same time with the rise of global capitalism. On the other hand, nationalism denotes the diverse population based on common symbols, beliefs, traditions and so on. However, he avers:

It is obvious that the sense of national belonging, whether based on clan or tribal customs, language, religion, etc., certainly has a historical origin and localizing motivation different from the emergence of the capitalist state as an agency to rally the populace to serve the needs of the commercial class and the goal of accumulation. (ibid. 4)

He further states that nationalism is generated by the bourgeois agenda of controlling and regulating the space of its market combined with the imperative of seizing markets and resources outside territories and people. This requires the need to superimpose the unifying myths of the imperial nation-state. He continues:

Nationalism is then interpreted by postcolonial theorists as equivalent to colonialism; the nation is an instrument of imperialist aggrandizement, so that if newly liberated ex-colonies employ nationalist discourse and principles, they will only be replicating the European model whose myths, sentiments, and traditions justified the violent suppression of "internal heterogeneities and differences." The decolonizing nation is thus an oxymoron, a rhetorical if not actual impossibility. (ibid. 6)

In postcolonial discourse, violence is thus located in ideas and cultural forces that unify various classes, clans, tribes, ethnic and religious groups within the concept of nation, and it is rooted in nationalist movements since they deny the heterogeneity of pre-colonial societies. “A popular awareness of ethnic categories is surely a necessary condition for ‘ethnic violence’”, remark James D. Fearon and David D. Laintin (850).
Fearon and Laintin in their essay entitled “Violence and the Social Construction of Ethnic Identity” (2000) explore and establish a link between the social construction of ethnic identity and ethnic violence. Their study is based on their close examination of texts on some highly violent episodes of ethnic relations around the world. According to them, there are two main ways to develop the insight that ethnic identities are socially constructed and the process of constructing identities help to explain ethnic violence. One direction looks at identity construction from the standpoint of individuals’ actions. On the one hand, there are the elites who construct antagonistic ethnic identities to provoke violence in order to gain, maintain or increase their political power. Fearon and Laintin discover a feature common to several of the case studies under their consideration. They perceptively observe that:

. . . internal conflicts between extremists and moderates belonging to a single ethnic group spur leaders or dissidents to provoke violence with members of an out-group. Violence has the effect, intended by the elites, of constructing group identities in more antagonistic and rigid ways. These newly constructed (or reconstructed) ethnic identities serve to increase support for the elites who provoked the violence while favoring the continuation or escalation of violence. (846)

On the other hand, there are the mass public whose individual actions create boundaries of ethnic categories. “Here”, the authors maintain, “ethnic violence arises out of the policing efforts of those who are unhappy with assimilation or by marginal members of a group who want to gain status with those whose membership is not in doubt” (847).

In the second direction, supra-individual discourses on ethnicity like the cultural systems have their own internal logics of culturally specific ways of thinking talking and acting that construct ethnic identities. And to quote their own words, “At best, the
modern discourse of ethnicity might be seen as a necessary condition for politicized ethnicity and thus ethnic war” (851).

The new theatre movement in India of which Ratan Thiyam is a dominant part, emerges at a crucial juncture in the history of modern India. Though its germs can be traced back to pre-colonial India, it appears with eminence just after independence. It was a time of transition, a time for the formation of a new nation. Two hundred years of colonial rule bound together numerous ethno-religious and linguistic groups of diversified India and evolved a national consciousness among them. However, the concept of India as a newly emerged nation experienced a setback as numerous ethno-linguistic groups of independent India tried to revert back to their pre-colonial status instead of assimilating with the new nation. There has been an apprehension among these groups of losing cultural and political identity. Such a fear gets material manifestation in post Independence India in the form of ethnic conflicts, communal violence, separatist movements, and the like.

Ratan Thiyam’s Mahabharata plays emerge out of the crisis of cultural and political identity which has been conspicuous in the colonial and post colonial history of Manipur. The crisis of identity is the consequence of various factors ranging from the land’s geo-physical location to its alleged annexation to the Indian Territory in 1949 after two thousand years history of independent Manipur. Theatre activists of Manipur like Thiyam, Kanhailal, Lokendra Arambam, et al. respond to this crisis in a symbolic manner instead of a direct protest as they are at home in allegorical representations; and narratives from myth, history and folk tale dominate their works. Samik Bandyopadhaya remarks:
In Manipur, where state violence reigns supreme, state power is synonymous with corruption, and democratic institutions languish, myths in theatre serve several functions – as safe shelters, facile celebrations, romantic nostalgia, and occasionally as masks or even barricades from behind which one can snipe at the enemy. (Also qtd. in Dharwadker, 211)

Identity and violence are organically united in Thiyam’s plays and it is quite impossible to separate them. One recurrent theme in his plays is that of an individual trapped by power mongers to participate in violence more as a scapegoat than as a victor or a victim. The victim is under a spell in which he is divested of his identity, rising at the end to seek his lost identity. In this context, Samik Bandyopadhyay in his “Introduction” to *Chakravyuha* quotes a poem composed by Thiyam himself entitled “The Word within the Brackets” which is worth quoting here:

My thoughts,
Chameleons.
A man
Coughing into a beautiful handkerchief
Delicately held in his hand.
The smooth, soft, face of man
Wearing undergarments long unwashed.

... 

The words within brackets
That leave me bewildered
In this battlefield of truth and lie that is my life,
Where man waits only to step into heaven.
Meanwhile on the way I leave behind my Draupadi dead. (xi-xii)

Thiyam’s plays are a parable of man’s vulnerable existence in a trouble torn universe. War and violence, death and destruction, atrocities on children and women,
subjugation and exploitation of the weaker section of the society hauntingly reverberate in the world of his plays. The first play of *Manipur Trilogy, Wahoudok (Prologue)* accounts the transition of the world from a state of earthly paradise to a virtual hell at modern times. Man made evils become the prominent feature of the contemporary world. The Seven Wise Men (*Maichous*) and the Seven Nymphs are invoked by worried human beings to liberate the present world from miseries and sufferings. The *Maichous* give an account of the horrible state of affairs of the contemporary world in general and of Manipur in particular. With the cries of people in anguish at the background, the third *Maichou* relates:

> Man has turned into beast, man will stop loving another man, man will devour man.  
>(*Manipur Trilogy*, 38)

The fourth *Maichou* adds to it:

> Fire breathing out from the mouths of the rich nations with sufficient arms and military power has started burning the weaker nations.  
>(ibid. 38)

The second *Maichou* gives vent to his views in the following manner:

> In the race of civilization, in the passage of time, grudge among nations have become very frequent. Killing and wanton murder, arresting and kidnapping would happen more frequently, news of wars and devastations would reverberate in all four directions and eight corners.  
>(ibid. 38-39)

The second play of *Manipur Trilogy, Hey Nungshibi Prithivi (My Earth, My Love)* also centres round the same theme – brutality and inhumanity of war. The play looks back at history to enumerate the incidents of death and destruction caused by war and violence from Seven Year Devastation of Manipur by the Burmese to the dropping of Atom bombs on Japan and the destruction of World Trade Centres. In the play seven
celestial nymphs weave a cloth to offer to the Almighty with a prayer to get the war stopped and to bring peace to the Earth. The nymphs assume different forms to witness the scenes of ravages first hand. The conversation between Hi-popki, the eldest nymph and Puwari who personifies history throws ample light on the world devastated by war:

**HI-POPKI.** The Earth is suffering like anything, *Epu*. The story of killing never ends. War after war, war-mongering cowards – I’m at a loss, *Epu* how will the future generation survive amidst the smoke of revenge, punishment and genocide.

**PUWARI.** Ah! How right you are! O Hi-popki, where on Earth will cool breeze blow when there is no love, kindness and respect and while superficial glittering, enjoyment and greed have subdued the pure unembellished faith? I, grandpa *Puwari*, am also dead tired on pulling the cart of time loaded with dead bodies. (ibid. 67)

One of the seven mothers of the land of Manipur who protects the culture and tradition of the land, draws a similar dismal picture of the land as well as of the whole of the universe in the third play of *Manipur Trilogy, Chinglon Mapan Tampak Ama* (*Nine Hills, One Valley*), and prays to the Almighty to rescue the beautiful world and humanity:

*Hey Ebudhou!* O supreme God of human, O Omnipotent One, on the coming of after *Heiyichak, Hayachak and Konnachuk*, in this world, when there is chaos, ‘when the wrongs have subdued the rights’, when the close ones have turned betraters, and when might has become right, please carry us, Your progeny, on the deck of Your boat and lead us to the land where there is truth, beauty, love and no suffering, *Lainingthou*. (ibid. 87)

War and violence together with a threat of third world war have reduced human beings into a state of, what the famous Italian philosopher Goirgio Agamben defines as,
homo sacer, turning the experience of existence into bare life, bereft of the basic rights of citizenship and the protection of law. In his *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998), Agamben analyses the meaning of *homo sacer* (sacred man) on the basis of an enigmatic figure of an ancient Roman law. He quotes Pompeius Festus, the third century Roman grammarian of repute from his treatise *On the Significance of Words* (*De Verborum Significatione*):

The sacred man is the one whom the people have judged on account of a crime. It is not permitted to sacrifice this man, yet he who kills him will not be condemned for homicide; in the first tribunitian law, in fact, it is noted that "if someone kills the one who is sacred according to the plebiscite, it will not be considered homicide." This is why it is customary for a bad or impure man to be called sacred. (1998, 71)

A person who was a criminal was banned from the society and his legal rights as a citizen were revoked and he became a *homo sacer*. As a result, he could be killed by anybody, but he could not be sacrificed in a ritual ceremony as his life was deemed “sacred”. Roman law was not applied to a *homo sacer*, although they would remain within the law. *Homo sacer* was therefore excluded from the law itself, while being included at the same time.

Agamben also analyses the meanings of the terms *zoe* and *bios* referring to the Greek philosophers of antiquity like Plato and Aristotle and the political implications ascribed to these terms. He says in his Introduction to *Homo Sacer*:

The Greeks had no single term to express what we mean by the word "life." They used two terms that, although traceable to a common etymological root, are semantically and morphologically distinct: *zöê*, which expressed the simple fact of living common to all living beings (animals, men, or gods), and *bios*, which indicated the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group. (1)
They were concerned not with the simple natural life but rather a qualified life, a particular way of life. Agamben notes that law has the power of defining “bare life” (zoe as opposed to bios: qualified life) by making the exclusive operation. Aristotle constitutes political life through a simultaneous inclusion and exclusion of “bare life”. Aristotle opposes the simple fact of living (to zen) to politically qualified life (to eu zen) which can be achieved through politics. “Bare life” is excluded from the higher aims of the state, yet is included so that it may be transformed into “good life” which is the function of the state.

According to Agamben, the status of sacred life is not defined by the sacredness associated with it, but by “the particular character of the double exclusion into which he is taken and the violence to which he finds himself exposed” (1998, 81). This violence cannot be classified as sacrifice, homicide, execution or sacrilege. This violence is the result of the sovereign decision, which suspends the law and the legal rights of all its citizens in the state of exception and thus implicates bare life within it.

Drawing on Carl Schimitt’s definition of the Sovereign as “he who decides on the state on exception,” Agamben introduces his theory of the state of exception in Homo Sacer and expands it in his State of Exception (2005). Here, Agamben explores state of exception as an increased extension of power at the time of crisis, where citizenship and individual rights can be curtailed or suspended in the process of claiming this extension of power by a government. In a state of exception, individuals have been reduced from bios (qualified life) to zoe (bare life). However, he adds:

In truth, the state of exception is neither external nor internal to the juridical order, and the problem of defining it concerns precisely a threshold or a zone of indifference,
where inside and outside do not exclude each other but rather blur with each other. The suspension of the norm does not mean its abolition, and the zone of anomie that it establishes is not (or at least claims not to be) unrelated to the juridical order. (2005, 23)

The state of exception endows one person or government, that is, “the sovereign” with the power of authority over others beyond the law.

In this sense, the state of exception is the opening of a space in which application and norm reveal their separation and a pure force-of-law realizes . . . a norm whose application has been suspended. . . . This means that in order to apply a norm it is ultimately necessary to suspend its application, to produce an exception. In every case, the state of exception marks a threshold at which logic and praxis blur with each other and a pure violence without logos claims to realize an enunciation without any real reference. (ibid. 40)

In Homo Sacer he states “The sovereign is the point of indistinction between violence and law, the threshold on which violence passes over into law and law passes over into violence” (1998, 30). The sovereign is, at the same time, outside and inside the judicial order. The sovereign is the one to whom the judicial order grants the power of declaring a state of exception and at the same time the power to nullify the validity of such declaration as he himself is outside such declaration enjoying full legal power.

Ratan Thiyam is an acute observer of the happening around him and is aware of the legal and political status of the individuals in a violence ridden universe inhabited by power mongers who incite the common people for war and violence for their own gain. The common people live in a world where an unannounced state of exception is imposed upon them without their being aware of it. In his plays, Thiyam addresses the issue where the common experience of men becomes that of living a bare life (zoe)
against the backdrop of overwhelming violence which transforms their qualified life (bios) into zoe. They are devoid of the ability to claim their legitimate potentialities to make rational articulations and imbibe their values. In a sense, for them, no ethical experience of existence is possible.

Thiyam’s most celebrated play Chakravyuha takes an episode of war and violence from the great epic the Mahabharata. In spite of the mythological source of the play, at a symbolic level, it is an enactment of the present crisis of Manipur and around the world where individuals are reduced to inescapable victims – the homo sacer or the zoe. As Pinak Sankar Bhattacharyya points out, often this play has been related with the insult and denial of civil rights of the Manipuris at the hand of state machinery empowered by the “Armed Forces Special Power Act” (n.p.).

War, whether it is mythological war of the Mahabharata or the World Wars, whether it is intransnational or international wars, whether it is ethnic violence or terrorism, it transgresses the temporal and spatial barriers in Ratan Thiyam. War has such a powerful presence and influence in Thiyam’s plays that it becomes a character itself, the most dreaded villain assuming the status of the sovereign having the right to proclaim a state of exception. In My Earth My Love, the play which was written as “an outcry against the socio-political-economical religious fracas which eventually results in war” (Ratan Thiyam in Manipur Trilogy, 112), Nurahal, the eldest nymph, exclaims:

Do you hear, the Emperor called ‘War’ has vowed to devastate the Earth?

Wake up, open your eyes.

How much would the Humans have to suffer only for the sake of a small section’s gain?
Why soldiers in camouflage, imitation of green leaves, are let to destroy the beautiful green fields and thick forests with bushy canopies of green leaves?

Where shall the fatherless children of war, born of women, deceptively called prostitutes, go? (Manipur Trilogy, 69)

War creates a state of exception where it multiplies its power and right to kill ignoring the citizenship, nationality of the killed and suspending their rights. The Woman in the same play addresses war in this manner which reflects the disgust and anguish the common people have against war:

Hey War! I hate you!

. . .
You never give us anything worthwhile

The disabled persons whose hand and legs have been amputated, orphans who have no one of their own, beggars, destitute, prostitutes, disease and malnourished children who are to be brought up by women widowed at a tender age, carrying all of them, where shall we go, where? (ibid. 71)

The First Woman in My Earth, My Love echoes the same hatred against war:

War, you have made us prostitutes.
War, you have made us prisoners.
War, you have made us bonded slaves.
Never-ending story of revenge and invasion in the fight for supremacy, women and children are fed to War, the Demon. (ibid. 73)

Ratan Thiyam, however, knows the secret for achieving peace in this violence ridden world. His third play in Manipur Trilogy, Chinglon Mapan Tampak Ama (Nine Hills, One Valley), which is a tale of trouble and strife besetting his beloved land Manipur, encompasses tales of violence from around the world threatening the very
existence of humanity. Matam, that is Time, is conceived as a demon in the play, who symbolizes violence and evil present in every society. He is a perpetual presence in society forever. The second Maichou (the Wise Man) in the play describes the nature of Matam (Time):

Human beings are slaves of a king called Matam. We do not know how to describe and explain Matam in detail – but Matam exists, He is associated with us, feel His presence. We are constantly made aware that He is there. (ibid. 98)

In the second scene of the play, the Maichous (the Seven Wise Men) are disturbed to discover that their beloved land has been destroyed completely while they were asleep. They come forward to save the people from their miseries. In the third scene, they compose a book of knowledge which also contains the wisdom of peace and happiness to guide the future generations to live a better humane life. Following is an excerpt from what they have written on peace:

4TH MAICHOU. Human beings deprived of independence, a society that is unable to remain independent, a country that can’t remain independent is full of woes but it is more wearisome if the meaning of independence is not comprehended . . .

3RD MAICHOU. But if a society wants to be an independent society it has to do away with murder, loot, torture, violence, illiteracy . . .

4TH MAICHOU. As a human being, personal independence is more important and better than political independence . . .

6TH MAICHOU. . . . Even though people speak about it [peace] quite often, not many are working to bring it into reality. A man who is not endowed with compassion and forgiveness will never get peace of mind.

3RD MAICHOU. Only when we can rout out completely from our minds the feelings of revenge, anger, envy, arrogance and over-ambition, we will get peace.

(ibid. 100-102)
Because of his apparent radical views, Thiyam is often tagged as a didactic playwright, a tag which he refuses to accept. Rather, he uses his plays as a vehicle for sharing his views, feeling and concerns with the audience as “Unless you share it together” he says, “there will be nobody to think about it. Without a collective vision, collective thought about peace as our target, it will be far away” (Manipur Trilogy, 116). Thus he endeavours to mould drama into a collective experience of the dramatist and audience having a tacit ambition to rediscover the lost traditions, myths and history to retrieve the lost geography of tranquillity and peace that used to be the actual foundation of the Manipur in particular, and of the world in general. Thus, he has discharged the duties of an artist towards the society by making the constituents of it aware of the happenings around them and the consequences of such happenings at the present time and the impact of it on the future.

WORKS CITED


Juan, E. San, Jr. “Nationalism, the Postcolonial State and Violence”


