

Making English Plays Indigenous: Hybridization of Ratan Thiyam's English Plays

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Abstract

Achieving the trademark 'indigenous' requires establishing style and forms that go beyond the canonical foundation. English plays in India are not new but the production and adaptation of plays into a state of ethnic and cultural indigeneity bent a grace of indigenous element with English theatric tradition. The 21st-century Indian proscenium is charged with multifarious cultural adaptation of the dominant Indian subcontinent discourses yet plays from the Northeastern states like Manipur assert its cultural identity through Experimental dramas of adaptations on national and international stage. The paper will look closely at how Manipur Experimental theatre announces its identity through an admixture of Indigenous, Sanskrit and Western dramatic traditions thereby creating a hybrid formation, making plays avant-garde. This paper will demonstrate the hybridization of Manipuri performances from ancient to modern viz-a-viz the nature of the performance tradition of Manipur while investigating how Experimental Manipuri English-adapted plays are perceived by different audiences drawing out different meanings of the plays. Ratan Thiyam's adaptations of Macbeth by William Shakespeare and When We Dead Awaken by Henrik Ibsen will be assessed for this research.

Keywords: Manipuri, Adaptation, Performance, Audience, Moving painting.

1. Introduction

Plays written by Western authors were percolated through colonial encounters in India. Colonialism in India gave birth to the modern Indian theatre which concerning the proscenium tradition follows the dimension of

Western dramaturgy. Theatre scholars agree that traditional Indian performances are not strictly scripted nor codified but rather performances are based on improv that flows within the collective consciousness of the community. The stories of Ramayana, Mahabharata, and other mythological telling were staged as an act of community engagement in celebration. Stagecraft, Direction, Visual Effects, and dialogue are the souvenirs of the colonial legacy that defines Modern Indian Drama. The English Play¹ was a medium of communication staged to disseminate education around the cultures in the colonial context. After Independence, The Theatre of Roots dug the indigenous performative elements and incorporated them with the inherited colonial theatre (Awasthi, S., & Schechner, R. 1989). Performances flourished in resuscitating Sanskriti Natyasastric treatise where directors employed rich Indian aesthetics of Hindu culture of different parts of India. Major Manipuri² dramatic creation emulates various Hindu aesthetics due to the Bengali Vaishnavism influence yet, Manipuri drama curate elemental difference that is regarded as foreign in comparison to other Indian dramatic production. The ethnic and racial difference is one major affair that stands as a bulwark for national sensitivity against considering Manipuri plays as Indian kind. The larger question here that needs to be addressed is whether Manipuri directors use Indigenous components to revive their Indigenous roots or to exotify for notoriety. Ratan Thiyam's foray into English adaptation garnered respect both from national and international audiences reassuring the versatility he possessed (Nilu, K. 2010). However, existing scholarship on Ratan Thiyam pertains only to his repertory company's ability to communicate the political allegory of Manipur through adaptations while failing to pay attention to his stagecraft and the aesthetic he adopts. Using Visual methodology, the author will investigate whether Thiyam exotifies indigenous elements for audiences outside Manipur by analyzing how the three audiences perceive his plays: International, Non-Northeastern National, and Local audience. The paper will also demonstrate Thiyam's work beyond the question of the intended audience from the perspective of how his artistic rendition of still art from famous painters gets converted into moving art, asserting a statement of brilliance in reproduction.

With this paper, the author aims to target three arguments. First, the hybridization of various dramatic traditions in the indigenous performances that shape the outlook of Experimental Manipuri Dramas. Secondly, in the works of Ratan Thiyam, his theatre has been revered because of his contribution to the 'Theatre of Roots' in Modern Indian Dramas; often, scholars normalize and ignore the problematic elements he adopt. Third, using the visual methodology, the author attempts to show how different audiences react to Thiyam's hybridized forms and stories.

Richard Schechner³ posits that performance and ritual are interconnected to the evolution of Theatre. In Greek Performance, Tragedy evolved from rituals commemorating the names of Greek Gods. Likewise, Manipuri pre-vaishnavite origin traces its performance to a ritual called 'Lai-Haroaba' - a ritualistic festival performed in the name of Manipuri Meitei's God and Goddess. The festival spans for days and each day has a specific function. During the festival, the Priest and the Priestess facilitate the entire celebration by acting as the middle passage between the Gods and the humans. The brief window⁴ of the festival allows supernatural forces not only to possess the body of the Priest in trance but the festival recounts the folk origin culture in dances and music on different days of observations. It is right to surmise that the Manipuri traces its origin to Lai-Harouba's performance. The dances like Khamba-Thoibi, and Maibi-Jagoi, and the cultural costumes, the musical rhapsody yodeled using an indigenous instrument like 'Pena' are a massive collective form of cultural indigeneity made possible by the observation of 'Lai-haroaba'. Sticking closely to the indigenous roots for Manipuri is an indigenous duty of imitating the ancestral performance (Devi, A. C. 2021), and 'Lai Haoroba' is one such event in a year where one is reminded of the omniscient God having potent power, instructed through the veils of the Priestess in trance. The festival serves as the repertoire where foreign influences interact and evolve into distinct cultural practices. To prove the statement, the Manipuri Vaishnavite dances like 'Ras-lila', Manipuri classical dance, 'Sankritan' take their influence from 'Lai-Harouba' performances and standardized as Vaishnavite performances (Devi, K. A. 2021). Later, pioneers of Theatre of Roots like Ratan Thiyam used aesthetics and styles that were quite close to the 'Lai-Haroaba' Performances and the Manipuri Vaisnavite performances. For instance, Thiyam's use of witches, the oracular tonality in Macbeth, and Saktam (Irene) in an adaptation of When We Dead Awaken produces imagery of the Priestess who would perform in 'Lai-Harouba'.

The historical account of Vaishnavism in Manipur narrates the influence of Hindu philosophy and how it created a new inspiration in arts and culture. The introduction to Bengali culture proved to be conducive as it accelerated literary production in Bengali scripts and the Bengali aesthetic integrated with Manipuri popular culture (Somorendra, A. 2000). Before the revival of the Meitei script, Manipuri culture defined itself along the lines of Bengali masterpieces but never produced a facsimile of its parent source. The hybridization of Bengali culture in Manipur rests as an assimilation of the Meitei aesthetic to the Bengali culture. Although Manipur became a Hindu nation, the indelible mark of Sanamahims⁵ and its apparent religious performances found in the display of 'Lai-Harouba' remain a base where Bengali and other cultural influences scaffold, defining and redefining Manipuri arts and aesthetics. In the space of the theatre, Arambam Somorendra⁶ explained the diasporic impact of first-generation Manipuri having had education outside Manipur experimented theatre with themes of religious and socio-political climate. Apart from the Socio-political plays, religious play in Manipur is ambiguous in describing what is original and what is exotic. Plays such as Devajani, Bhagyachandra, Kourav Parajay, and

Sita Banvas borrow Hindu sources but with the Meitei language assertion and the Hindu religious following of the masses, the play for the audience became indigenous construction. Similarly, there were also Indigenous religious themes played alongside, as seen in the production of Moirang Thoibi, Pamheiba, and Sija Lai oibi. The evolution of Manipuri drama from colonial and early post independent era thus demonstrate a trajectory where religion played a major role in hybridizing the Manipuri Drama with themes of both Sanskriti and Indigenous tradition whereby the Proscenium, a colonial western construction begets a synthesis of three culture into one form of Manipuri Dramatic tradition.

The arrival of Western Play in Manipuri Proscenium is a recent phenomenon, dating its earliest performance in 1995 with Nongthombam Premchand's adaptation of Aninoulls' Antigone⁷[sic]. When talking about English-adapted plays, the target audience is an important part of the discussion because, English adaptation comes along with a tag of an elitist background, catering its audience to only the ones that are privileged enough to understand and read the play. The above-mentioned conception is a contemporary understanding. But when these adaptations started performing, it was not much about privilege but rather it yielded the same approach of assimilation to the popular Meitie culture. To elaborate, Antigone by Premchand was a tussle between the State of Manipur and the central government in the wake of Indian Independence where Manipur losing its sovereignty was much like the state of rebellious attitude exuded by Antigone (Mee, E. B. 2011). In Premchand's production, he highlighted subtly the Indian Army's mistreatment of the people of Manipur which was a hot topic relevant and construed in the name of adaptation. This gives a strong indication that the play was for all the masses. In addition, the Macbeth adaptation directed by Lokendra Arambam in 1997 was performed on a floating stage⁸ attracting people on the riverside, to participate in the tragedy. The performance of such defied proscenium tradition and adopted a stage that is much closer to an indigenous form of play 'Sumang Lila'⁹.



Figure 1: Dr. Faustus trapped in his own schemes (Premjit, TH. 2021)

Nonetheless, Western-based drama was a kind of production that directors adapted to suit a common audience that slowly transitioned to an enclosed private audience. Dr. Faustus directed by Th. Premjit serves as a case in point that demonstrates the transformation of Manipuri Western drama in the use of an entire Western aesthetic in his production of the 2021 play of the same name, organized by CHORUS REPERTORY THEATRE, IMPHAL (Fig 1). Plays as such, fall under conventional theatre and it juxtaposes with Experimental Drama adopted by Ratan Thiyam in Theatre of Roots.

Theatre of Roots aimed to revive and redefine theatre for post-independent India (Awasthi, S., & Schechner, R. 1989). Directors from different parts of India aimed to achieve new dialogue through experimentation of Indigenous traits. Directors used Indigenous features that were concentrated in the rural part of India, yet, the drama produced by famed directors was fundamentally for the urban audience. A case like this is also seen in Manipur, where Western Dramatic theatre stands at a crossroads with the folk theatre of Sumang Lila. Sumang Lila is extremely rooted with the indigenous Meitei community and they do not have one particular stage but they travel and perform in the courtyard, in Sumang Lila, the production company goes to people unlike people go to the playhouse to watch the drama (Premchand, N. 2021). Whether we call it fortunate or unfortunate, Sumang Lila failed to adapt to Western play. Sumang Lila as space is a decolonizing sphere with its main component resisting and challenging proscenium theatre, produces plays of Manipuri Origins and the farthest the story in Sumang Lila adapted are from the land of major non-English speaking countries like China and East Timor. For instance, Sumang Lila produced plays related to international events of strictly non-colonial stories, like the changing power politics in East Timor in Gusmao gee khudol, the ordeals of German-occupied Lidice in Lidicie gee Gulap, the violent fate of Uganda in Ugandagi Maraibak and the Chinese resistance to colonialism in Opium War. Sumang Lila as an Indigenous theatre has time and time again proven its relevance by taking up stories from different sources thereby hybridizing its essence yet it has strictly resisted adaptation of the Western writers. To understand this anomaly, R.K Yaibiren Sana, a research scholar from the Department of Mass Communication and Journalism, at Tezpur University, has stated:

First, Shumang Kumhei/Leela has been a rigorously experimented medium or say in its constant evolution. This remains true for the performance techniques it adapts to or adopts, its space (as you might have observed from the shumang to the open spaces or elsewhere). It is so, as well an experimental space for several playwrights. Dr Makhon Mani Mongshaba's Malemnganbi is an experiment with Sophocles's Antigone. This, however, could not hold the audience and I see this as an 'adaptation failure' because of lack of contextualization to the specific situation or culture or 'our' history and so was Devdas. Popular Shumang Kumhei plays are deeply the

stories of the land and its people. People simply do not quest for any stories they cannot have a link to. Hence it is not a mere question of resistance to playwrights of particular origin, rather, a question of critical contextualization which needs to be adapted to the situation of the land and its people. (Sana, R. K. Y. 2023, November 13)

It is at this juncture that we question for whom the English-adapted plays are for. Similar to this question, one is also confronted with why Independent India did not abandon colonial descendant proscenium if they are searching for roots. Participation is one of the key components in which we find the purpose of English-adapted play. Yes, proscenium theatre is a modern Western construct, but proscenium is also a space where different cultures interact. Indigenous culture could at times be limiting and conservative but interaction with different cultures moves the growth of modern civilization. The theatre served the purpose of entertainment and education in colonial times and in the post-colonial scene, theatre allows small communities to look out beyond its own culture and feel a part of a larger civilization. Hence, English plays often promote the universal nature of humanity through their competent themes concluding the relevance in post-colonial indigenous stages.

Chorus Repertory Theatre adapted the English play *When We Dead Awaken* by Henrik Ibsen Ashibagee Eshei directed by Ratan Thiyam in 2008 at Delhi Ibsen Festival (Datta, A. n.d.). Ratan Thiyam achieves his message through the assimilation of tonal and visual aesthetics while at the same time making his Indigenous work distant from Indigenous opinion. Based on the visual representation of Thiyam's work, one could notice the heavy emphasis he puts on creating the visual effect at the center of most of his productions that it becomes the primary method for discerning plays for the audience who do not speak Manipuri. The question of whether the emphasis is overly done at the expense of the plot of the play depends on the kind of audience Thiyam purports to target. Given Thiyam's reputation, we can categorically divide his audience as i) National ii) International, and iii) Local/ Manipur.

2. National Audience

Theatre on the national stage usually for established theatre companies are state-sponsored events in the form of competitions or national theatre festivals whereby theatre companies from various parts of the nation participate in the demonstration of their rich cultural heritage. A play like *Andha Yug* by Dharamvir Bharati could be staged by different directors at national events and each director produces their work based on the original or their take of the play. The interpretation that these directors take differs from one another based on their cultural

backgrounds but closely aligns with the national identity. For example, the play of Andha Yug will have a Hindu aesthetic in various forms of cultural indigeneity. Considering, the geographical isolation of the Northeast from the rest of the nation has not only created ethno-linguistic differences but its cultural representation in art differs majorly in its creative production as well. For instance, In Mahabharata Gandhari Sari is appropriated with a Manipuri woman garment called Phanek and Rani Phee in Thiyam's Andha Yug (Fig 2). Though the garment is appropriated with an equivalent of a woman's sari, there is an elemental difference between the two, Sari, is a one-piece fabric while Phanek is a lower garment that is always paired with Phee an upper body fabric.



Figure 2: Fallen Gandhari (Thiyam, R. 2016a)



Figure 3: Arjuna explains Chakravyuha to Subhadra. (Cinema Vision India, Mumbai (CVI). 2018)

The cultural performance displayed on Gandhari's costume set apart Manipuri's Hindu identity while at the same time, its stark elemental difference from the Sari a common Hindu marker makes Manipuri's adaptation of Andha Yug exotic. While aesthetic representation displays cultural grounding, actors playing characters are exoticized as well. The factor of otherness is defined not only by aesthetics but also by the actors involved in plays. Mahabharata in conventional cinemas and Hindi serials, is portrayed by actors of North Indian descent, thereby normalizing rigid representation of Indian Epics. Thus, when Arjun and Draupadi are on stage in Chakravyuha (Fig 3) the entire scene played by Manipuri actors could give an out-of-the-ordinary experience for the national audience.

Taking Ibsen's adaptation of *When We Dead Awaken*- Ahshibagee Eshei Thiyam's use of visual drama is the main method of communication for the national audience since they cannot understand Manipuri. The adoption of visuals is extremely effective in withholding audiences' attention but the non-verbal cues complemented with screaming dialogues reaching out to the audience gives prominence to the performance. In the adapted play *Macbeth*, Thiyam uses the tribal motifs primarily to construct a modern oriental tribal land, the music and the sound communicate the aggression leading to greed and ultimately *Macbeth's* destruction.



Figure 4: Rubek and Irene united in spiritual realm (Thiyam, R. (2010b)

One major criticism about such adaptations is that Thiyam perpetuates stereotypes that are not true to its sources. In *Ashibagee Eshei*, the women surrounded in a circle while dancing to their own tune wears costume like *Raas Lila* but in all white (Fig 4) which is a contrast to the *Raas Leela* dancers wearing colorful costumes. Thiyam's *Macbeth* is fictionalized in his creative invention but the tribal imagery that is presented on stage has no connection to one specific tribe and this archetypical image produces stereotypes of Manipuri tribals among national audience who would think that all Manipuri tribal act in ways displayed on stage. However, whether Thiyam uses stereotypes or not, the very differences in language, costumes, objects, and music used in his plays, already create an exotic experience for the national audience. To take a few examples, in *Ashibagee Eshei*, the women characters wear Meitei costumes of two types: one that of Domestic life worn by *Shakhenbi* (*Maia*) and the other that of Priestly life worn by *Shaktam* (*Irene*)(Fig 5). Now, taking these two into account, they are very different from those of women's costumes represented nationally in *Salwar-Kameez* and *Sari*. In adapted *Macbeth*, Thiyam's usage of objects such as the Manipuri reed mat- *Phak* and the wine jug carried by *Lady Macbeth* shows an indigenous culture far different from the Indian civilization.



Figure 5: Maia in domestic attire (Thiyam, R. 2010a) (left) and Irene in maibi attire (right)

3. International Audience

The adaptation of Western plays calibrated on the stage holds enough traction on the international stage because of its Western origin. The added perspective remodeled by a non-Western director increased the worth of universal ideas propounded by the Western thinker. For the Western audience, the adaptations of Thiyam bolster their pride in their stories' ability to reconfigure themselves, never getting old, suiting every walk of life outside the West. The stage is also directed in ways to relate to the Western audience for example the "melting clock" of Salvador Dali in Ashibagee Eshei is not only promoted to show how well the theatre company is adapted to hybridizing Western artwork into the indigenous craft but presents a pastiche of a unique directorial authority different in taste but familiar in context. Irene in Ashibagee Eshei is equated to a Manipuri priestess known as Maibi by its costume which gives an interesting take on the play, diverting majorly from the original play. Irene's character in the original, couldn't be really defined as dead or alive, or human or non-human for that matter by its plaster-like skin color but Thiyam's Irene represents a figure who is outside and inside of the society by equating her to a priestess who happens to wear white occasionally. Thiyam's Irene is unlike the original Irene because, from the outside reality, she is someone who is accepted and regarded as a normal member of society. The objects of three dolls representing the triangular relationship between Shaktam Lapka (Rubek), Shakhenbi (Maja), and Lamlanba (Ulfhejm) has a cultural connotation to Meitei 'Laiphadibi¹⁰'. The fact that Thiyam introduced these "Laiphadibi" (Manipuri Dolls) is an inspiration he got while reading *A Doll's House* (Nilu, K. 2010). But the episode where Maia (Shakhenbi) makes dolls punctuates that Maia (Shakhenbi) in

the argument with Rubek (Shaktam) understands what it is like to be an artist since doll making in Manipuri culture is a female-gendered job. By showing how Irene and Maia are adapted to the indigenous context, adding another feminist approach unknown to the international audience, Ashibagee Eshei is made avant-garde. The structure of the plot is already familiar to the Western audience, what they look for in the adaptations is something new to the storyline and Thiyam indigenous tweaked elements provide a spectacle that gathers a large crowd. With strong visual communication at the core of his entire play, Thiyam convinces effectively that his adaptation is a force to be reckoned with. His stagecraft aids in complementing a large grandeur that is at par with the international standard of theatre. Thiyam's Macbeth also creatively communicates the ever-growing idea of greed and power into the composition of tribal politics, proving Shakespeare yet again a universalist but the employment of tribal aesthetics everywhere in the play makes it a must-watch for spotting the differences in comparisons with other adapted Macbeths.

4. The Local Audience

The connecting line between Thiyam and his local audience is the language and the aesthetic he adopts. The language asserts the Manipuri identity in his major productions on stage beyond Manipur but his recent English adapted plays have created a disconnect with his local audience. Usham Rojio in his article GOODBYE RATAN THIAM points out that Ratan Thiyam fails to communicate the textual intricacies of Shakespeare. He further elaborates through Erin B Mee's argument on Thiyam's detachment from his local audience as critical to the theatre of Manipur. Could it be because Thiyam is hybridizing way too much? For example, Thiyam has deliberately used Noh theatre's techniques that stylized communication through forced voice modulation completely different from Manipuri's normal day-to-day talking convention. This adopted voice modulation of Noh stresses dramatic tension, however local audience finds it foreign and indistinguishable from the Manipuri aesthetic which he also uses in combination with various Manipuri-aesthetic-like elements. To elaborate on how Thiyam uses not-so-original but adopts Manipuri aesthetic elements, in Ashibagee Eshei, Irene (Shaktam) is loosely portrayed as a Maibi (priestess) in her costume, however, a normal Maibi (Fig 6) does not wear white phanek embroidered on the hem, neither do normal maibi (priestess) wear a glove or adorned in all white. Could this representation be all for the eyes? In adapted Macbeth, Thiyam's use of the Japanese Noh technique is prevalent and overpowering with heavy diction which at times becomes indiscernible to what the characters are speaking even for those who could understand Manipuri.

The tribal costumes worn on the land of Macbeth are even created by Thiyam's vision of a tribal that does not exist in real life(Sarkar, S. 2018, August 13). The point of how he creates a fictionalized tribal people is questioned further on his choices of objects that he tries to present as a tribal aesthetic. The use of a fishing trap (Kabo-Lu)¹¹ as headgear for the tribal men is rather exotic to the eye than accurate(Fig 7). Macbeth's hairstyle or for that matter Lady Macbeth's hairstyle does not have any close resemblance to any tribe of Manipur. Could it be just a mere construction of a tribal people or are local audiences able to find some resemblance in the play? Thiyam has purposefully used Manipuri elements although they are tweaked heavily to suit his creative vision, they however stir up debate regarding the question of the intended audience.



Figure 6: A Maibi in trance (Kongkham, R. 2023)



Figure 7: Army in Macbeth wearing Kabo-Lu as a headgear (up)(Thiyam, R. (2014) & Kabo-Lu the fishing trap (down)(MAIBAM, R. 2021)

To dissect how Thiyam has tweaked indigenous elements, Macbeth by Ranabir Mangang Heisnam could be assessed for comparative analysis. To begin with, the figure of witches in Thiyam's Macbeth is formless but produces an effect of the Maibi (Priestess) in trance-making prophecies. The figures are grand/formless having white tentacles, but the voices they enunciate are visceral like Maibi (Priestess) possessed by the spirit of the god. The imagery produced by the witches in Thiyam's Macbeth may be uncanny but for the local audience, the representation is contrasted by the idea of Maibis (Priestess) who are as normal as normal human beings living among them, creating an unseemly doubt while watching the episode play out. Heisnam's witches on the other hand are human-like, but not so human in their representation setting them out as Heloi (Nymphs). In Manipuri folklore, Heloi is described as attractive young female nymphs luring men to insanity (Chaki-Sircar, & Manjusri. 1984, January 1). The way they make prophecies to Macbeth and Banquo, the uncanny grandeur remains absent but the local audience gets connected by its human representation of a nymphic being exciting the audience by its folkloric representation of popular drama. From this, we can ground the idea that Thiyam's use of spectacular formless witches is a creative choice elaborated to amaze audiences of all types while Heisnam's work is calibrated to the Manipuri audience solely. (Fig 8)



Figure 8: Heisnam's witches (left) (Heisnam, R. 2022b) & Thiyam's witches (right) (Thiyam, R. 2016b).

The costumes worn by actors in Thiyam's Macbeth are certainly tribal however, one cannot trace from which tribe Thiyam has taken inspiration. It remains only as speculation to tribal aesthetic use of colors Black and Red, to which a local audience vaguely speculates it as Naga or Tangkhul or Maring or Chiru since all these tribal primarily use the colors red and black in their tribal attires. The composition of Music in Thiyam's Macbeth resonates with Japanese Noh and Kabuki musical background while Heisnam's Macbeth from the beginning to the end uses Manipuri sankritan and non-sankritan music entirely supporting the development of

the play without much dialogue. The objects Thiyam used in his Macbeth also digress much from their original sources, for example, the reed-mat locally known as Phak used by the indigenous people to sit on the floor has been utilized as the letter of Macbeth's victorious love (Fig 9), which could be perceived in two ways one, exoticizing an object from its intended use to appeal to an audience unbeknownst to Manipuri culture. On the other hand, this reed-mat supports the directorial vision on the emphasis of the gloat and greed Lady Macbeth possesses hinting at the central hamartia the character transforming at the opportune moment. Soldier's costumes in Thiyam's adaptation lack organic resonance too, for example, the visor they adorn is simply non-existent in any tribal of Manipur or Manipuri culture. Nonetheless, Heisnam's Macbeth pays careful attention to the details of the objects used in the play.

The stark differences between the complementary color scheme of tribal attire in Thiyam juxtapose with the vibrant colorful attire of Heisnam's version. The Thang-Ta is a martial art aboriginal to the Meitei kingdom developed to educate youths for the protection of the kingdom in wartime (Meitei, L. S., Singh, H. K., Singh, H. P., & Devi, A. J. 2020). Heisnam's Macbeth performance in war reverberates the tactics of 'Thang-Ta'. In addition, Macbeth's war-time attire though colorful, but traditionally black and red, is worn with knee-length trousers and a turban scarf for tightening the turban. (Fig 10).



Figure 9: Lady Macbeth gloating on the Phak letter (Thiyam, R. 2017)



Figure 10: Heisnam's Macbeth performing Thang-Ta (Heisnam, R. 2022a)

The long hour of Ranabir's Macbeth is extensive of the Manipuri Dance performances where women characters such as Lady Macbeth and witches dance with the artistic grace of 'Manipuri Raas Leela', and 'Khamba-Thoibi' (Fig 11) The dialogues and the music fall into a rhythm of Manipuri Sankritan, Sankritan being philosophical religious music of aesthetic Manipuri Vaishnavism (Konsam, R. 2021). A strong demonstration of Meitei Vaisnavite culture is expressed in the attire of the King and Lady Macbeth. The King wears a shawl and a Pheijom; a Meitei traditional men's pajama, while Lady Macbeth wears "Moirang Phee", a traditional silk textile with its design inspired by the teeth of the mythological pythonic god 'Pakhangba' (KURIAN, P. H. 2013).



Figure 11: Heisnam's Lady Macbeth imitates Manipuri Dances (Heisnam, R. 2020)

From the assessment of the two adaptations of Macbeth, one is left to wonder whether Thiyam is doing anything for the aesthetic without being mindful of its sources. The answer should be open-ended, as one also needs to look beyond this intended audience and find the genius in Thiyam's mastery of his artistic creation. Where do we find that in abundance? It is in his ability to transform static art into moving art.

5. From Painting to Theatre

The adaptation of the Western play by Manipuri directors itself is a product of hybridization, the ways in which they adopt or appropriate the Western text into indigenous performance are creatively polished not only in the storytelling of the plot but also in the interweaving of Western static art into moving artwork. Western art such as *The Persistence of Memory* by Salvador Dali (Fig 13) and *The Flying Fish* by Marc Chagall (Fig 15) are incorporated into the visual story of Ashibagee Eshei. This highlights Thiyam's prowess in making visual art correlate with the dramatic text. Dali's painting *The Persistence of Memory* is captured on the stage as the Melted clock representing Irene's memory stuck in the moment of her past decapitating her emotional time (Nilu, K. 2010) (Fig 12). The way Thiyam connected Dali with Ibsen is brilliantly done on a stage evoking a surrealist statement without dreaming but awe-inspiring. Nobody would have thought of Irene's chagrin with a surrealist statement but the re-representation of Dali's *The Persistence of Memory* brings a nuanced understanding of Irene's character in Thiyam's adaptation.



Figure 12: Irene's frozen memory (Chorus Repertory Theatre., & NILU, K. 2010).



Figure 13: *The Persistence of Memory* 1931 (Dalí, S. 1931)

The moment of Irene's emotional death translates into her stillness while the clock hangs loose depicting Irene's stuck in the past. The difference between Dali and Thiyam is the number of objects they used in their artistic creation. Although Thiyam uses three objects (The leaf-less tree, Irene, and one jointed melted clock) as compared to Dali's numerous details, Thiyam is apt in communicating his art in concrete detail.

The clocks in *The Persistence of Memory* are limber as if the clocks are soggy but Thiyam's single clock gives an impression that the clock is melting in drips. The color of the clock is white and its minute hand, hour hand, and the numbers on the clock are embossed in gold matching Irene's shade. This gives an impression in the clear juxtaposition of the clock and Irene hanging almost dead on the tree that- it is Irene's personal time that is displayed on stage. Marc Chagall's *The Flying Fish* is also renditioned on Thiyam's stage in the scene where Irene and Rubek float on a Lake reminiscing of their past lives (Fig 14). The scene recaptures the early modern art into a moving art hybridizing into local context. In Chagall, the fish is seen carrying a Jewish's three candles but in Thiyam the flying fishes are the most enchanting moment in the scene because it installs the idea that Irene and Rubek are in fact in another realm. The flying fishes are complemented by lotuses against Chagall's red flowers, but the objects though hybridized convey the same meaning of the conjugal relationship between a man and a woman. The moving frame is highlighted in blue hue like Chagall's painting and it is contrasted with normal lighting on the side of Maia and Ulfheim signifying the difference between the spiritual realm and the living realm. The swift motion of the canoe and the lotuses moving in the water current recreates a daily choreography of the people living on the floating island of Loktak Lake. This entire episode foregrounds Thiyam as the master storyteller who balances his audiences through a hybridized mode of representation.



Figure 14: Irene and Rubek in spiritual realm (Thiyam, R, 2022)



Figure 15: *The Flying Fish*, 1948 (Chagall, M. n.d.)

The purpose of English play lies in educating the unfamiliar and familiar using various sources. The dependence on aesthetics lies in collaborating elements to make the unfamiliar familiar by bringing down the global to locale and at the same time elevating the locale to global. Thiyam's English-adapted plays contribute to disseminating global trends in Manipur and on an artistic scale his theatre significantly contributes to the excellence of Experimental Theatre. His production as *Erin B Me* indicates is "visually poetic and aurally muscular, making dazzling use of sound, music, rhythm and color. Thiyam's work engages all the senses—it is "total theatre." (Mee, E. B. 2017, March 15)

Notes

1. Plays authored by Western playwrights, not only English authors but also Greek, Norwegian, and other continental authors.
2. Manipuri here refers to the dominant cultural identity in Manipur- the Meitei: A major ethnic group in Manipur. While Manipur's identity internally comprises many tribals.
3. see *INTRODUCTION: THE FAN AND THE WEB, PERFORMANCE THEORY, RICHARD SCHECHNER*, p ix-xi. (Schechner, R. 1988)
4. The period within the festival where oracular predictions are made in regard to the community's overall welfare and yearly warnings. Priestess could also get into trance and make predictions on normal days besides during the festival.
5. A Pre-vaishnavite religion of Manipur based on pagan and animism
6. See Manipuri Drama: Indian Literature, March-April, 2000, Vol. 44, No. 2
7. Erin B. Mee, *The Fight for Regional Autonomy through Regional Culture: Antigone in Manipur, North-East India*
8. See Usham Rojio, *Macbeth: Stage of Blood*, Imphal Free Press. (Rojio, U. 2020, June 21)
9. Sumang Lila/khumei (a type of theatre, played using an all-male cast), is performed in the courtyard on an elevated stage in the middle keeping the dimension on all four sides open.
10. Indigenous Manipuri Dolls made from pieces of clothes, see *Laiphadibi: The Cloth Dolls that Guard and Guide* (Manipuri People, Akoijam Sunita, Sunita, A. 2019, October 10) <https://www.sahapedia.org/laiphadibi-cloth-dolls-guard-and-guide-manipuri-people>
11. a fishing trap made with sticks in an oval shape, see Traps, in Bamboo And Cane Culture Of Manipur, <https://ignca.gov.in/divisionss/janapada-sampada/northeastern-regional-centre/bamboo-and-cane-culture-of-manipur/>

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