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Performance Review

Buddha Chingtham's Mythical Surrender

Review by

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&

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For many Indians, the achievement of independence on 15 August 1947 marks the end of a long struggle, the moment when, in Jawaharlal Nehru's words, 'the soul of a nation, long suppressed, finds utterance' (Brecher 355-6). People looked forward with hope to the creation of a new political order, one in which the problems associated with the British Raj would disappear. *Mythical Surrender* is an attempt to destroy these sanguine narratives of the people by challenging the imperial metropolitan discourse of the centre, which is at the heart of these narratives.

Mythical Surrender, a play written by Buddha Chingtham, is the first instalment of the Manipuri trilogy. The other two plays are *A Far Cry* and *The Priestess*. The play directed by Ningthouja Deepak of NT theatre, an Imphal based theatre group was staged at Shri Ram Centre for Arts and Culture, New Delhi on 17th January, 2011 as a part of the 14th Bharat Rang Mahotsav, the annual theatre festival of the National School of Drama (NSD). This review, through an analysis of the performance of the play held at NSD, intends to examine how both -- the form and the content of the play -- defy the metanarratives of Indian nationalism and hybridity.

Beginning with its title, the play invariably invokes Suresh Awasthi's idea of the "theatre of roots," which was later popularised by Erin B. Mee's book of the same name in which she analysed the work of three major Indian directors, all practitioners of the "theatre of roots": K. N. Panikkar of Kerala; the Kannada playwright, actor and director Girish Karnad; and Ratan Thiyam of Manipur in the extreme northeast of India, as it depicts the harsh realities and miseries of the common people of the north-eastern Indian states caused by the counter-insurgency forces deployed in these states, through a word game of ancient myths. Awasthi, in 1989, claimed that the "theatre of roots" is an unconventional theatre "which has been evolving for some decades in India as a result of modern theatre's encounter with tradition....It is deeply rooted in regional theatrical culture, but cuts across linguistic barriers, and an all-India character in design" (Awasthi 48). Furthermore, he adds that "the return to and discovery of tradition is inspired by a search for roots and a quest for identity. This is part of the whole process of decolonization of lifestyle, social institutions, creative forms, and cultural modes" (Awasthi 48). In the wake of the argument generated by the theatre of roots,

Mythical Surrender attempts to demystify the monolithic construct of north Indian nationalism.

The play through an interaction of centre (representative of North India) and periphery (representative of north eastern region) shows the horrors of absolute power exercised by the centre on the periphery. Indian nationalism is posed in the play as a cunning word, which is used to mask the metonymic extension of north Indian states dominance over north eastern states.

Furthermore, it focuses on how the armed forces challenge and demean the 'right to life' of the people in the name of Indian nationalism. It is ironical that the Indian forces which are meant to protect the lives of the people instead rape women and murder innocent people. It highlights the plight of the lives of the common people in north east who are caught up in the armed conflicts, through symbolism and theatrical gestures. The authority or more precisely the military forces are represented by serpentine-like characters whose real face is shown through a combing operation carried out by them in one of the villages of the Loktak Lake of Manipur whose inhabitants are largely fishermen and fisherwomen. During this operation, they killed a man and raped his wife (Shanarei), the protagonist played by Nepram Dhanapati Devi. By assigning a name Shanarei, which means marigold, the play shows how the centre rapes and contaminates the pure cultural hybridity of the periphery.

The imbrication of north and north eastern discourses, and its impossibility is shown through the illegitimate son of Shanarei whose appearance and actions resemble the serpentine-like characters. The son, like his rapist father joins the army and returns only to terrorize his mother and kills her father-in-law who comes for a visit to Shanarei's place. Finally, Shanarei's act of killing her monstrous son should be read as an act of exorcism of the evil. Alternatively, the killing of a son (a representative of the centre since his appearance and actions resemble his father) by the mother (who represents the peace loving people of north east) signals the impossibility of a hybrid narrative. The internationalism embedded in contemporary discourses of hybridity is challenged as the play shows how hybridity has become synonymous with political intervention and interjection.

Mythical Surrender is a ritual display – “not simply a doing but a showing of a doing” (Schechner 105), which means that the entertainment itself is a vehicle for complainant and accused to exchange places. Ningthouja Deepak, in the teeth of crumbling democratic values, redefines ritualistic dancing, which used to be a performance, and “a way of facilitating trade, finding mates, cementing military alliances, and reaffirming (or reordering) tribal hierarchies” (105) as a subaltern's articulation of existential angst or a call for survival. Thus, every dance performance, in the play, at first, becomes a constant portrayal of Marshall McLuhan phrase that “the medium is the message” (7) as the actors in the garb of serpentine characters struggle to keep imminent doom at bay. Secondly, the presentation of a dance sequence by the actors while playing the role of serpentine

characters, in a dim light and a gothic setting, does not fail to benumb the audiences by showcasing innate lust of the evil characters for violence and sadism. Through a masterful use of kinesics - the swaying of the bodies and the serpentine movement of the hands and the feet in sync with the drum beats, the choreographer conveys the capitalist urge of the democratic nation to subvert and homogenize regional differences.

The director juxtaposes the picturesque imagery of *phumdis* (a series of small floating islands exclusive to Loktak Lake, the largest freshwater lake in northeast India) and a noose hung outside Shanarei's hut, in order to demonstrate alienation. The alienation of the people is further emphasized through long tragic monologues of Shanarei, accompanied by hysterical convulsions. The direct Brechtian like address of Shanarei to the audience is one of the most important theatrical techniques employed in the play. It not only enhances the relationship between the actors and the audience but it also serves as a warning message to the people of the impending danger.

Critical discussions on what is generally referred to as "human identity," a continuous state of being both oneself and human, have been "predominantly psychodynamic or sociological and informed or intertwined by ideas often associated with subjectivity and subject position" (Reynolds 4). The play, by harping on the predilection of the Indian government, concentrates on the means by which North eastern people develop a cognitive sense of themselves as separate from the North Indians. According to the play, this divisional process which creates two positions of "out there" and "in here" is the aftermath of the Indian government's step-motherly treatment of the North-East states. This remorseless treatment by the Indian government is reflected in one of the instances when a group of fisherwomen who sets out to fish in the lake instead of catching fish, catches corpses of infants which have similar appearances with that of the serpentine-like characters and the sudden chaotic cries of the women that follows makes the audience go numb and lost in shock for a moment and yet it manages to show how many other incidents of rape and murder are kept under-cover and unnoticed. The background *Khunung Esei* (a form of traditional folk-song) which accompanies the cries of the women, though in a fading tone, elevates the fear factor and symbolises the utter distress and helplessness of the women. Simultaneously, the employment of *Khunung Esei* as a background song, and *Pena* (a folk musical instrument) gives a vivid picture of the rich cultural heritage of north eastern region. With the aid of the archaic language spoken by the women folk, the play also succeeds in providing a sense of timelessness to the horrors faced by the womenfolk.

It is striking that many north eastern plays not only of today but also of the past write almost obsessively about the invasion of identities in the name of nation building. Indubitably, the performance manages to send the message to the centre that something is rotten in the state of India.

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