

# PEBET: A POLITICAL SATIRE

Dr. Khushboo Agrawal  
Guest Faculty  
English Department  
Allahabad Degree College

**Abstract:** Pebet is a Manipuri play by H. Kanhailal. The story has been adapted from Manipuri phunga wari (fireside folktales). It's a story of very small bird called Pebet whose species did not exist anymore. The mother Pebet struggle has been brought up in the story for her children whom she aims to save from cat culture. H. Kanhailal has reshaped the character of cat to introduce the element of satire. The strategy of cat brings in new plot in the old folktale. Kanhailal destroys the frivolity of animal fable by depicting social abuse or anti-social behaviour.

**Index Terms-** motherland, satire, Hinduism.

Manipur is a small state and suffered from colonialization of Hindu culture. It's a neglected state of India where poverty, unemployment, lacks of production (agricultural & industrial) raised insecurity among the people. The state's economy depended upon outside traders, it leads to corruption. Kanhailal even named his theatre 'the poor theatre' in relation with the poverty of the Manipuri region. Pebet can said to be voice of Kanhailal for his motherland. Pebet is a lost species of a tiny bird like Manipuri's weak identity and importance.<sup>1</sup>

This small bird is shown as the mother of seven children. The eldest and the youngest are boys and the five in between as girls. The symbolic meaning of Pebet is one who is frail, but uses guile; flexibility of tactics and tenacity of will to get his way. Guarding her brood mother Pebet circumvents the predatory attention of a cat by flattering him:

A string of fermented fish  
A pitcher full of water  
A paddy pot filled to the brim  
And the red fruit amidst bamboo groves  
You are fairer than them all.<sup>2</sup>

Mother Pebet was coaxing and cajoling cat not because she has the fear of her children of being eaten up. Rather she had the fear that her children would be turned to cat culture (comprised up of cunningness and meanness). It's a satire on Hindu culture which has overpowered the Meithei culture. Being a Meithei believer Kanhailal didn't understand Hindu culture and its forceful implementation. In one of the "Lunkun Thongba"<sup>3</sup> ceremony the boy entering the faith (Hinduism) made to dress like a Chaitanya Mahaprabhu and begs for donations from his (Meithei) community and cries in pain. Kanhailal brings up the question of liberty and fraternity of Manipur state in front of audience through his play *Pebet*.

Kanhailal portrays patriotism in reference with cultural formations. Mother pebet portrayed motherland(Manipur). The act of throwing pebbles on mother(Pebet)under the influence of other culture can be traced back to the history. In the early eighteenth century King Pamheiba ordered to burn Puya (old manuscripts) of Meitei culture paying homage towards the supremacy of other culture. He even exiled scholars and intellectuals who revolted against his injustice. That revolt and injustice still breathes among the population which has widely accepted Hinduism. Manipuri literature still depicts the unbearable loss of one's culture and history under Hindu hypocrisy. In the 60's, 70's there came up many associations to revive the culture. The young Meithei generation lost faith in the supremacy of Hinduism due to the negligence of the Manipur state by the central government. It happened under the ruling period of Garib Nivas and Bhagyachandra that the Meithei culture witnessed destruction of Meithei gods. The burning of manuscripts, and its replacement with Bengali manuscript brought much humiliation and loss to the Meithei culture. The entry of Vaishnavism tortured Manipur region so also the entrance of cat in Pebet threatens Pebet brood.

Pebet is Kanhailal's response to the politics of domination of the mind through culture. The Pebet mother represents the rock-bottom which gives a cultural and political authenticity to the people of Manipur. On the one hand the Pebet children represent those who have been swayed by the new imperialist culture. The play shows the sufferings of the Pebet mother at the hands of imperialist represented by the cat and her own children who have loyalty to the cat and converted themselves to the cat culture. Kanhailal portrays that all Pebet's children get captured by cat's ideology. They were tortured by cat and were brainwashed with a Sanskrit shlok *Janani Janmabhumi Shya Swargdapi Gariyasi* which means "mother and motherland are greater than heaven".<sup>4</sup> The shloka used as weapon by cat to make Pebet

children stone their mother pitilessly. Children begin to sing this shloka with an abandon of emotion. They turn against their mother with the hegemony of Sanskrit language.

The disintegration of the Pebets family stands for the disintegration of the Meithei culture with the arrival of Hinduism. The seven pebets disintegration stands for the seven clans that comprises Meithei community. The disintegration is raised through culturally variant feeling of patriotism. As in the play the cat uses his language and strategy to make the pebets abuse their own mother. Mother tongue is the caricature of feelings imbibed in particular ideology for mother land, brotherhood, culture and religion. In the play the cat uses Sanskrit shloka *Janani Janmabhumi* from the Hindu epic Ramayana to turn the Pebet brood against their mother (representing Meithei culture). Language and culture hegemony can seriously ruin the motherland culture and tradition making the victim feel ruined.

Kanhailal has raised an issue of defining the superiority of language as the motive of central government politics applied upon Meithei language and culture. To show that art and humanity are more respectable and they should not be discriminated on the basis of language and religion. Kanhailal has not used verbal script in Pebet and very successfully he lays the story through body language, sounds and rhythms of bird in front of his audience. He portrays that language is a medium for expression it can't be superior or inferior. Sanskrit is origin of various other languages but using it for domination with political purpose is not appreciable.

Mother Pebet bears the pain and torture levied on her by her children. Mother Pebet's song breaches all the boundaries of sadness and disappointment while her children were busy licking the cats arse. The middle sons revolt against cat brings twist in the story and mother Pebet revives the old rhythm of "TeTu".

The birds in the whole play do not speak. The script of the play only has a Sanskrit shlok. The cat is an embodiment of wily Brahminism, armed with Sanskrit as a weapon. The birds, on the other hand, do not 'speak', except with movements and sounds.<sup>5</sup>

The inspiration for this play can be traced back to Kanhailal's life. It happened in Delhi as the student of NSD in 1963. Where he was expelled for alleged absence without official leave but unofficially the real problem was that he was not able to read and write Hindi. He felt ashamed of telling it to his family therefore he did not return back. He realized his humiliation owes a lot to the political condition of Meithei people. Kanhailal raises the issue of identity as 'the primary consciousness of his time'.<sup>6</sup> Manipuri region has rich culture and tradition; non-Meithei may feel alienated in their society because Meithei people consider them Indians. This shows Manipuri's pride lies in their independent identity and their protest in the voice of Pebet against the rule of cat.

The man playing the role of the cat in the play wears a short yellow dhoti and holds a *mala* of wooden beads in one hand. Thus, in the play, the cat is represented like a pseudo-monk that symbolically stands for the Vaishnavite power. The cat uses the classical method of divide and rule. She portrays among the seven children that their loyalty needs to be towards mother and motherland. She misguides them in Sanskrit shlok. Rustom Barucha puts Pebet children significantly and appropriately as "dutiful cadet" as to make situation more comprehensive where these Pebet chicks not only adopt Cat-caterwauls but also Sanskrit in place of their mother tongue. There is terrible irony as they stone their mother in the name of the motherland. Highly influenced by their new learning Pebet chicks perform the act levied on them by the dream sequence deity like character of cat. They regain their consciousness when they were made to lick the cat's arse. Under the name of Hinduism, the cat shows the corruption and harassments attached to it. The Pebet chicks get matured at this point as they revolt against Hinduism hypocrisy by biting at cats back. Thus, portraying and introducing a long run of struggle between them.

All the fighting scenes are done using traditional Meithei Marshall art called Mukna and Thang-Ta. It's a fusion performance where cat and bird's performances are shown with body language and verbal sounds by actors. There were no light and sound effect used by Kanhailal. The role of mother Pebet was used to be played by her own wife Sabitri devi. The pseudo-monk cat provides a bell to the captured younger brood which symbolizes temple thus giving him respect in order to use against other broods as he has been given higher rank by entering Hinduism. The political strategies are the part of dream sequence which mother Pebet imagines on the loss of younger pebet at the hands of cat. Which at last we find has been took away by cat to be eaten up. The last scene has not been changed and we get the same trick and dexterity used by mother Pebet in the folk tale to free her brood. As the cat was about to eat the young brood mother Pebet suggest that it's not the way to eat small brood by directly putting in mouth rather one shall wash and dry it under sun in order to get the full taste. Thus, the small brood gets refreshed and energized under sun and flies away with full might.

As quoted by Rustom Bharucha in New Theatre Quaterly:

People, whether they are Naga or Meithei or African, cannot ultimately be suppressed. Somehow, they will spring up again from the roots like plants. Neither power nor money can destroy them forever. For a time, they may be lured, but slowly, silently, some force will be working in them from underground. You cannot suppress Africa so easily. (pg.16)

As the lost species of Pebet signifies the loss occurring in Meithei faith so also the end signifies that Meithei people can't be suppressed totally. Like the mother Pebet was able to save her young Pebet from the political clutches of society so also the play *Pebet* bears a hope in its heart that Meithei cannot be uprooted at any cost.

<sup>1</sup> Lokendrajit Soyam.1997. An Artist's response to contemporary reality: a case of two directors. Seagull Theatre Quaterly , Ed.Anjum Katyal. Issue 14\15, Seagull Foundation, June\September 1997, Calcutta:29.

<sup>2</sup> Kanhailal, H. Pebet.2004. Twist in the Folktale. Seagull Books, Calcutta: 61.

<sup>3</sup> Bharucha Rustom.2004. Twist in the folk tale. Seagull Publications, Calcutta: 154.

<sup>4</sup> Bharucha Rustom. 1998. The Indegenous Theatre of Kanhailal. New Theatre Quaterley, vol.8 part1,edited by Clive Barker,Cambridge publication: 14.

<sup>5</sup> Banerjee, Treena. Proscenium of pain, Outlook. <https://www.outlookindia.com/magazine/story/proscenium-of-pain/297994>. 16 Oct. 2016. Web.22 Mar. 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Lal, Ananda. 2004. Introduction. *Twist in the Folk Tale*. Seagull Books, Calcutta: xii

