

Manipuri Folk Epic – Khamba Thoibi : Performance Strategy and Path of Composition Study of Manipur Women’s Folk – Operetta – Moirang Shai of Ima Jati

Dr. Khangembam Khoni

Lecturer

Manipur University, Imphal, India

Abstract - The Khamba-Thoibi is an epic derived from ancestral oral traditions of Moirang, Manipur. It narrates the heroic deeds of great figures, sometimes leading to triumphs and tragedies. Khamba-Thoibi love stories were so unique that the people of Manipur loved them for their precious qualities in values of nationhood and civilization.

The paper attempts to pick up an interesting area from the Khamba-Thoibi legends and analyse the performance processes from a genre known as Women’s folk operetta termed Moirang-Shai, the story songs of Moirang. The Moirang-Shai became very popular during the post war periods and almost died out since the seventies because of lack of patronage and changing audience tastes.

Key Words- Khamba Thoibi, Epic, Moirang, Moirang Shai, and Performance

INTRODUCTION

The Khamba-Thoibi epic is one of the most cherished national treasures of the Meitei people. An epic normally is regarded by western scholars as a long poem, typically derived from ancestral oral traditions and narrating the heroic deeds of great figures, sometimes leading to triumphs and tragedies. These tales excited the listeners on the grace, behaviour, noble thoughts and deeds, their love and romances and struggles by the lovers to unite in spite of opposition, and Khamba-Thoibi love stories were so unique that the people of Manipur loved them for their precious qualities in values of nationhood and civilization.

The paper attempts to pick up an interesting chapter from the Khamba-Thoibi legends and analyse the performance processes from a genre known as Women’s folk operetta termed Moirang-Shai, the story songs of Moirang. The Moirang-Shai became very popular during the post war periods and almost died out since the seventies because of lack of patronage and changing audience tastes. Only a few singers remain in contemporary Manipur. The paper deals with the work of late Ima Jati (1933 – 2010), who almost singly created a woman’s performance during post war periods based on the lore of the Khamba-Thoibi romances native to her soil.

The story of love between the rich princess Thoibi and the poor Khamba was reported to have occurred in the twelfth century, during the reign of the Meitei king Loiyumba (1074 – 1122). Moirang was an independent principality ruled by its own kings, descended from the God Thangjing, who was learnt to have descended from Thangjing mountains and formed the mixed community inclusive of fishing agricultural peasant populations west of the Loktak Lake. Moirang was ruled by one Iwang Puriklai Chingkhuh Telheiba (1083 – 1138) and he did not have male successors. His younger brother Chingkhuh had a daughter princess Thoibi, who fell in love with a poor orphan Khamba (who in fact had a rich pedigree which was in oblivion at that time). Their love became very serious where the entire royal tradition of Moirang was challenged by rivalries, ambitions and intrigues amongst the clan families. The true love between Thoibi and Khamba was severely opposed by Nongban, a prince of the Angom family, who wanted Thoibi in order to grasp the crown of Moirang, since the Moirang king had no sons. His mentor Chingkhuh, the brother of the king became extremely upset by the disobedience of his daughter Thoibi, who refused to obey her father’s wishes to marry Nongban. Both Chingkhuh and Nongban after many failed attempts to persuade her, conspired to make a life attempt to eliminate Khamba. As a result of their assassination attempt to have Khamba perish under the feet of the royal elephant, there was a crisis in the polity. Chingkhuh was sent to jail and after his release, he sent Thoibi in exile to a land called Kabaw, now in Myanmar, for three months.

The chapter *Loi Kaba* (the return from exile), in the long folk epic, is a stimulating chapter in the love story. Chingkhuh in remorse of his punishment through exile of his daughter sent his official with fourteen attendants to bring his exiled daughter back. The performance however does take up the arrival of the official at Tamu and delivering the message to the Kabaw king to have the princess back to Moirang. The Kabaw king who treated the daughter like his daughter pleads to her to present a dance to the deity of Kabaw to ensure her safe return. Thoibi, her friend Chaning Khombi, daughter of the Kabaw king and other female friends present an exotic dance item and prepare for departure to Moirang.

The next scene takes up the long return of the princess with her escort, the Ipu Naijahanba. The long trek back to Moirang was enacted with a fond relationship between the gracious princess with the old official, a servant of the Moirang court. In order to shorten the tedious journey the couple exchange pleasantries, where the official sings the songs of toponymic information on important places on the way. The princess joins the ensemble, remembers her meeting with her lover Khamba, the promises they made to each other when Khamba planted his banana plant and bamboo stick before parting. Those banana and bamboo plants now had become full mature and fully grown. Thoibi anxious of positive signs appeases the spirit of the bamboo as well as the banana plant. She also

crosses the temple of the deity who presided over the regions near her birthplace. She also sings about the full blossoming flowers, the grasses of her Moirang land near the Loktak Lake and such other beautiful scenes when she suddenly sees in the distance the yellow umbrella of the noble Nongban, who with his clown sidekick in attendance, were waiting at the feet of the Tera tree at a village called Kumbi. She takes up courage to face the ordeal of the unavoidable meeting with her father's favourite.

The scene shifts to the foot of the Tera tree, where the noble fantasises about his fond mistress and his clown Shoura, obeying his master for every command, but patiently bearing the absurdity of his master's ambitions, poke fun at his useless dreams of his beloved. He plays with the foibles and false ambitions of the Moirang nobility, clowns about the irritableness of his commands and reflects the audience's conscience siding with the true love between the lovers Khamba and Thoibi and thus exposes the artificiality and villainy of the opposition to true love. Thoibi's handling of the villain is one of the most loved and appreciated scenes of how the lady played up the ego of her suitor, feigns sickness when eating a fruit offered by Nongban and pleads to him to enable her to ride his horse while he walks on foot beside the horse. They sing of mutual hopes of the future, when slowly and surely, the horse treads forward and returns, but finally gallops away on the horse to her lover Khamba's house.

At the final scene the elder sister Khamnu sees the galloping horse at a distance and seeks her brother Khamba's assistance to stop the horse. Obeying the commands of his respected sister, he uses his martial skills of wrestling and captures the horse in his stride and gets the lady down. His lover fondly sings and enquires about the martial skills of her beloved hero and antiphonally he sings back of his skills of wrestling, his inheritance from his father Khuman clan's mukna tradition. The two lovers are then united for the time being for new chapters in the long story to unfold.

ORIGIN OF THE WOMEN'S FOLK OPERETTA

The epic of the Khamba-Thoibi stories had very stimulating beginnings in the history of Manipuri performances. Two versions are related by scholars and followers of the heroic tale. As we remember in history, the principality of Moirang was integrated into the Meitei polity only in the eighteenth century during the reign of Bhagyachandra (1763 – 1798). Earlier though the Moirang clan had close blood and kin relations with the Meitei people, Moirang itself was independent in its affairs. Occasional wars in the principalities were fought to resist the integration attempts by the Meitei from its headquarters at Kangla at Imphal. A devastating invasion of Moirang was learnt to have been experienced by Moirang during the Meitei kingship of Ningthou Khomba (1432 – 1467). But the intrigues by Moirang chieftain Khelei Nuwa Telheiba, who was a maternal uncle of Bhagyachandra, in his ambitions to expand the territory of Moirang pleaded to the Meitei court to grant land for this purpose. It was not granted by Bhagyachandra's elder brother Gourashyam. Nor the matter was considered by Bhagyachandra. Thus thwarted in his ambitions, Telheiba was learnt to have pleaded to the Toungoo kings of Burma to invade Manipur. However it was during the reign of Alaung-paya, the first king of Konbaung dynasty (1750 – 1760) who devastated Manipur in 1758 and successively three times by his sons in the sixties, which led to Bhagyachandra's self – exile in Assam. In the late 1760's he recovered his throne and as reprisal for Moirang treachery, the Meitei invaded Moirang, decapitated the population and Moirang was kingless for seven years. The hatred between the Moirang and the Meitei was too long lasting and it seems during the reign of Maharaja Chandrakirti (1850 – 1886), the Meitei reconciliation was effected, perhaps through the acceptance of the Moirang dignity, recognition of its culture, traditions and civilizational narratives as part of the expanding nation status of the Meitei. The Khamba-Thoibi legend was accepted as part of national folk treasure of the integrated Meitei in the 19th century. The chance event was provided by the meeting between the Meitei king Chandrakirti with the Governor General of India Lord Northbrook at Cachar on the Barak river in 1874. On the way to the meeting in the elephant journey the king's minstrel Chanamba Pena Khongba was learnt to have sung the love story of Khamba and Thoibi to shorten the pains of the long elephant journey. Later after return back at the palace (home), the ladies of the court asked the Pena minstrel to re-sing the songs, of Khamba and Thoibi. The story spread very fast in the pena songs, but the story was taken up by actors and clowns in the late nineties and early twentieth century. During the reign of Maharaj Chandrakirti clown performers, environmental performances of Lord Krishna's killing of serpent Kaliya in 1857 and traditional Phagee players took up matters of national events as performances and the Khamba – Thoibi episodes were played out environmentally in the fag end of the nineteenth or the early twentieth century. After the colonial rule was introduced in the late 19th, many of the traditional actors of the pavilion dramas and monarch's clowns were freed and they took up short skits and jokes to taunt the British masters and during the reign of Maharaja Churachand (1891 – 1941), two forms of plays known as Moirang Parvas – Moirang chapters the old and the new (Areeba Moirang Parva of Kongpal led by Kshtrimayum Kanhai and the Anouba Moirang Parva of Keisampat led by Nilchandra Sharma of Keisampat) vied with one another to capture the minds of the audience. There was a huge energization of the Khamba-Thoibi narratives, in songs of the pena, in plays by the Shumang Leela artistes and by the new traditions of the Khongjom Parva ballad singing. Court painters like Bhadra painted the Khamba Thoibi legends. In the 20th century Mangsidam Kalachand painted the Lai Haraoba murals at the Thangjing temple and the walls of the pavilion by R.K. Chandrajit. But the outstanding entry was of women's performance, which was a post second world war phenomenon.

Women and the Khamba-Thoibi epic was therefore a second narrative, with quite a novel story, with its endogenous development in the performance history of Moirang. Local scholars of Moirang tell us of the exciting development of local pena songs in the traditional Lai-Haraoba environment of the God Thangjing during the summer months. In the ancient times two minstrels Luwang Mandom Atomba and Nongban Khoidong Ahanba used to sing a peculiar song in pena music known as 'Lamthon Eshei', which is a toponymic narrative describing the naming of places and geographic regions through historic events, an ancient culture which the Moirang shared together with the Meiteis. Such songs were part of the regular secular programmes presented to the God Thangjing to please Him and His consorts. During such festivities, it was pleasantly accepted for young women, men and elders to present songs and dances and historic events of the Keke Moirang people became themes to be presented to the Gods and Goddesses for their pleasure. After the integration of the Meitei, Moirang and other clans in the Meitei in national ethnonym of Meiteis and after massive conversion of them into Hinduism there was a profusion of dances and music and women's performance of women's chorus (Nupi Pala) and others became compulsory parts of the daily happening of the Moirang people. The traditional dances and music of the Lai

Haraoba continued and expanded its activities. Women singers came out of the environment of Moirang and spread their art to various nooks and corners of the state. At such religious occasions, at Imphal and other village spaces it became a norm to invite the Basak singer to spend some more time to provide other exciting secular folk songs from their native places and Moirang became famous for introducing the Moirang Shai, the songs of Moirang dealing with Khamba Thoibi legends. Philem ningol Jati, was the pioneer of the art, from whom spread the art of Moirang Shai. Some other Moirang Shai singers also claim the origin of the style of singing and performance, but since Moirang Shai has a history of its own, of various performance programmes dealing with Khamba Thoibi legends, it is worthwhile to agree with the claims of Moirang scholars that Philem Jati Devi was the originator of this woman's art, probably in the year 1951.

PERFORMANCE STRATEGY AND COMPOSITIONAL PROCESSES OF THE MOIRANG SHAI (LOI KABA – THE RETURN FROM EXILE)

It must be understood that 'opera' is naturally a music drama, where songs in a particular story event formed the main characteristic of the narratives. However, according to the Cambridge Guide to World Theatre, opera is strictly speaking, one particular child in the family of music-drama. Born in Western Europe at the end of sixteenth century, it is now, according to some, fast approaching its demise. It is essentially, a regional art form, although it has been exported with trappings of western civilization.

An opera is not a play with music, nor is it a play set to music or a sung play. Opera is a form of theatre in which music provides a dramatic and aesthetics predicate to the situations to which the characters find themselves. This is a western concept, where the Manipur opera form does not follow. The Manipuri folk opera is nearer to the Chinese opera, where the drama is enacted with sung words as dialogue and there are a lot of dances, clowning and singing and males played female roles too. There was exotic, exquisite make-up and costumes. The Manipuri folk opera as initiated by Ima Jati of Moirang has a lot of music, vocal performance in the musical manner, movement, dance and bodily gestures. Normally in women's performance like in the Nupi Pala of the post-Hindu period, there is a term called 'Mot-Tauba' – a sort of bodily expression where the element of Abhinaya is predominant. But as one delves deeper, we find that in the Moirang-Shai, what was distinctive was the free utilizations of songs, used as dialogue often and dancing form of body movement in the course of the dialogue between characters, the whole exposure of the narrative had an easy play-way structure (shannaba), where the words used was the colloquial archaic language of the Meitei, probably of the 19th and 20th centuries. The earliest Moirang Shai performance as noticed in the beginning of Ima Jati's career, it is learnt that she followed the ordinary Nupi Pala structure (woman's chorus), when the main woman singer (Eshei Hanbi), with her vocal assistant (Khonpangbi) were faced by two other female singers in the opposite, with a drummer or two as percussion players. Earlier they were Langtepfung players. They sing in response style the episodes. She also did mono performances with lone drummer (in Dholok) and herself impersonating the characters in the Khamba Thoibi story. She was also assisted by a local flutist. Her characterisations were remembered fondly by her near and dear ones, along with elders. Perhaps, much later in her life she did produce an all-women's opera, of the Loi Kaba and some other episodes, where women performed male characters. Her acting, singing and declamatory talents were imbibed amongst her closed disciples, who are still active today. Jati herself played the Thoibi role in the environmental production in the Ibudhou Thangjing Haraoba festivals, when she rode the horse from Kumbi. Phairenbam Gouramani of Ngangkha Leikai and Maisnam Thambalngou of Pansang Leikai used to impersonate Khamba in successive productions in the fifties.

In the play Loi Kaba which Ima Jati performed in the Moirang Shai tradition, the space is flexible and symbolic. Any area in the space can be a palace, a temple, a road or even the foot of a tree. If she does a mono performance, in a limited space her bodies' versatility expands and her improvisatory qualities of impersonation of different characters like Khamba, Thoibi, Chingkhuba, Nongban, Khamnu, etc through dialogue, songs and bodily expressions are very very appropriate. Certain specific styles in the use of the body, especially in Khujeng Leibi, Champra Okpi, Tareng leibi are hastened in quick tempo, much quicker than what we see in Manipuri dances. There is a tinge of novelty in that performance. It seems her body also anticipates the drum and the rhythm or Taal follows her movement. She has her own style in the quickening of tempo and a sudden release at that. There is sudden shift in the movement which is also exhilarating. In all performances, her range of emotions and expression in terms human relations, either in love or pathos, or in comic situations etc. it touches the very heart of the audience. These shades of emotions are revealed through the use of the musical repertoire of the Pena instrument (Pena Sheishak), which are defined traditionally as Shikaplon, Jaat sheishak, Tehai etc.

She also uses the local Khunung Eshei or folk song tradition which encapsulates the mind of the audience as something that belongs to their own people.

These unique characteristics are also creatively expressed in many performatory styles in the normal Nupi Pala forms and in the latest group women's performance she did in her later years. The Loi Kaba that we are now describing is one of her unique legacies that we attempted to revive a few years ago. The dramatic structure which our women conceived with sheer economy of details, women playing male roles and revealing the conflict of true love opposed by the villain and how the heroine escaped from the villain with her personal ingenuity and found her love are beautifully brought out in this musical drama which was showcased in New Delhi, Guwahati, Itanagar, Imphal and at Moirang Thangjing Temple in 2011.

Now it is meet that our own cultural institutions need to revive this delicate dramatic form which is nearly dying out in Manipur today.

REFERENCES:

1. *Late Ima Jati, conversations before she died in 2010.*
2. *Ojha Phairembam Nungshi Devi and Ojha Wahengbam Tejbati Devi, disciples of Ima Jati.*
3. *Ojha Moirangthem Nodia, Late Ojha Moirangthem Raghmani and Ojha Philam Mani, traditional scholars of Moirang Thangjing Yageirel Marup, were resource persons.*
4. *Ms. Maibram Thaba Devi of Moirang, acted as Khamba, in conversation with the writer.*
5. *Ojha Dr. Lokendra Arambam, who revived the Ima Jati's Moirang Shai in a project for the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, New Delhi in 2010-11, in a production by the Forum For Laboratory Theatres of Manipur where the writer was a Research assistant.*
6. *Hijam Angahal, 'Khamba Thoibi Sheireng', 2005, published by Hijam Romoni Singh, Yaikul Hiruhanba Leikai.*
7. *Arambam Dorendrajit, "Moirang Thoibi", 1992, Meino and Khomdan Publications, Sagolband Meino Leirak.*
8. *Sarangthem Boramni, "Moirang Shaion", 5th Edition-2008, published by Sri Gouranga Press Haobam Marak, Imphal.*
9. *Journal "Yageirel" 18th issue Annual, August 2012, Moirang Thangjing Yageirel Marup Moirang.*