

## Assimilating the ‘Earth-Energies’: The Ecological Roots in Heisnam Kanhailal’s *Pebet* and *Memoirs of Africa*

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### Abstract

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In the 1970s, the performance traditions in India witnessed a flurry of creative interventions to articulate contemporary sensibilities. If the state-sponsored ‘theatre of roots’ ultimately made these interventions what Rustom Bharucha called a ‘cosmetic’ act bereft of any meaningful connection with its originary ecology, theatre practitioners like Heisnam Kanhailal evolved a different idiom of theatre by rooting it in their immediate surroundings. Kanhailal conceptualised his theatre as the ‘theatre of the earth’—theatre that is rooted in the earth and is conditioned by the accumulated wisdom derived from the earth. It heavily relies on a ‘performance text’ that predominantly emphasises the non-verbal and gestural components and evolves organically through an intense process of physicalisation where the actors would establish a nuanced sensorial connection with the natural environment, its innate rhythm, movement, fluidity, and poeticism. The actors would absorb those earth-energies as they would effortlessly enact the most agonisingly turbulent facts of everyday life and the moments of resistance. By studying the ecological roots in Kanhailal’s *Pebet* and *Memoirs of Africa*, this paper looks at the ways in which his theatre assimilates the organic principles of life and how those earth-energies permeate the participant-audience, creating a symbiotic bond between them and the natural environment. The paper will examine, using appropriate theories, how the ‘theatre of the earth’ transcends the spatial limit and performs not only the ‘ecology of pain.’ but also an ‘ecology of hope.’ The paper will also explore the possibility of creating an ecology of resilience as it practices a syncretic form that focuses on the regenerative power of nature, thereby bridging the rift caused by the anthropocentric logic of domination and development.

**Keywords:** ecology, organicity, physicalisation, resilience

i.

On July 30, 2024, India woke up to the horrific news of the death of hundreds of people in the Wayanad district of Kerala in a tragic event that was quite indulgently called a ‘climate catastrophe’, a ‘climate disaster’ or even a ‘man-made disaster’ by various media houses and civic bodies. Though it would be too early to arrive at a conclusion about the actual reasons behind it, this Wayanad landslide adds up to the long list of similar environmental catastrophic incidents (often with anthropogenic roots) that have wreaked havoc, claiming many lives, destroying people and places ruthlessly. If the cloudburst and the subsequent heavy rains softened the soil and caused the fatal landslides at Wayanad, the horrifying visuals from the devastated bioregions seem to have softened our deadened human sensibilities and shored up those ecological concerns that have either remained dormant or have been sanitised by our complicity with an essentially anti-ecological paradigm of the anthropocentric/humanist logic. This churning-up of ecological principles sets into motion, just as it has done in the case of the Wayanad landslide, a series of serious arguments on the questions of sustainability and the planetary future in the face of recurring eco-crises. The ontological nature of this explorative probing studies the validity of anthropocentric insistence on human centrality in all forms of epistemic exercises and renders Cartesian human superiority untenable. The ecocritical directions embedded in such inquiries, almost in a posthumanist tone, view humans as part of an interrelated ecological network where they co-evolve along with other forms of presence—both living and non-living. The unrestrained autonomy that would otherwise allow humans to control and manipulate the other-than-human world around them is revoked and denied, changing the dynamics of the human/non-human relationship.

What is even more important is that the disrobing of human autonomy coincides with the autonomising of the material body of nature, what Jane Bennet defines as “thing power” or “vitality” of matter and material (viii). According to Bennet, this “thing power” is the ability of matter to “impede or block the will of the humans” and to “act as quasi-agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own” (viii). This trajectory of thought can easily define the natural calamities as a retaliation by the non-human world, as an act of ‘encounter’ by the elemental world where the constituent substances *enact* their agencies to redress the ecological imbalance that occurred due to thoughtless human interventions and intractable human hubris. However, the emphasis is not much on the retaliative capabilities of elemental nature but on the organic autonomy of matter and its innate propensity for self-actuation and self-preservation—the regenerative reflexes of nature. In such organic imagination, it is a ‘living nature’ that perceives, responds, and performs its being. In its proximity emanates a “distributive energy” that permeates both the human and non-human bodies (not just corporeal forms, but all forms of materiality), creating an organic ecology that sustains (disrupts, if necessary), moulds and fashions forms of vital presence through interactions and interpenetration. It is this ‘living nature,’ with its vitality,

primitive energy, and spontaneity, that (in)forms the bedrock of Heisnam Kanhailal's philosophy of theatre.

Kanhailal, a profound organic voice from Manipur in modern Indian theatre, believes in a "philosophy of performance, which has an organic relationship with an overall philosophy of things, of life" (Thoidingjam and Zutsi 195). He defines his theatre as the 'theatre of the earth'—theatre that is rooted in the earth and is conditioned by the 'accumulated wisdom' derived from the earth. His theatre is thoroughly 'localised' and rooted in, to borrow a phrase from Theresa J. May, his "ecological situatedness" (95). The embedded ecological resonances in his theatre practice may inspire a spirited reading of his works in terms of the formulations and tenets of eco-theatre that have originated and flourished primarily in the West over the last two decades. However, the present paper has tried consciously to resist that strong pull, not because doing so would be anachronistic and a dangerous elongation of eco-theatre's stated concerns and objectives, but because it would be untrue to the cardinal philosophy of his theatre practice, his life. This, however, is not to proclaim that Kanhailal's theatre stands squarely in opposition to the existing body of eco-theatre and its practices. Instead, this essay looks at it as an organic form of eco-theatre that is not a derivative of the well-established Western form but a creative alternative that is more earthy, flexible, and elemental in its form and process. The organicity—and the originality—of his Theatre of the Earth is laced with his syncretic view of theatre and how he has positioned his theatre in relation to the experimental theatre of the West and the Theatre of Roots of his time. His theatre assimilates the organic principles of life and his ecology. Moreover, the proficient body of the actor—the 'natural human body'—absorbs the 'earth energies' and effortlessly communicates to the audience-participants the most agonisingly turbulent facts of everyday life and the moments of resistance. By analysing the performance texts (meticulously prepared by Rustom Bharucha) of Kanhailal's *Pebet* and *Memoirs of Africa*, the study has attempted to trace and explore the ecological roots of this Theatre of the Earth, and to show how, despite its strong localised origin, it could transcend the spatio-temporal limits in communicating the rituals of suffering and resilience.

ii.

Being a firm believer in the continuity of tradition and malleability of his theatrical practice, Kanhailal always viewed his Theatre of Earth as a 'theatre of transition' that is free to interact with the existing theatrical traditions—both from the West and India. Like his theatre, he showed instinctive reflexes in accepting his creative encounters with the methods and concepts of theatre practitioners like Jerzy Grotowski, Jacques Copeau, Bertolt Brecht, Joseph Chaikin, Antoin Artaud as well as of his Indian contemporaries, Habib Tanvir and Badal Sircar. One may find an unmistakable influence of Grotowski's Poor Theatre or even Sircar's Third Theatre in matters of actor training, performance idioms and some basic concepts about the idea of theatre. However, he always maintained that all these creative encounters helped him "seek out new possibilities" by paving the "way for invention of the

personal values” of his theatre (Thoidingjam and Zutsi 29). The “new possibilities” that made his theatre stand out were achieved, as he believed, through his meditative yet vigorous ‘private’ exploration of his socio-ethnic Meitei roots, through tuning into his “ancestral past of nature lore and native lore” (9). His termination from the Nation School of Drama (NSD) in 1968, he later recounted, proved to be a turning point despite the immediate disappointment and setback. It distanced him from the institutional urban theatre of his time and “brought him closer to home” (Bharucha 22). It encouraged him to turn an ‘inward eye’ and explore “the wild sources of primaeval human nature’ in “the ethnic jungle of impulses” (Thoidingjam and Zutsi 9). To discover the ‘eternal human’ and the aspects of the ‘wild’ life, he brought his theatre closer to nature and situated his actor-training process in the “ancestral tradition of body culture” which was again, Kanhailal discovered, modelled on the patterns, rhythms, and movements of the natural world. The ‘natural human body’ or the human body in its ‘naturalness’ becomes vital in Kanhailal’s theatre as the primordial impulses connect this body to the actual world of natural life. The memory of pristine human nature encoded in the “nature lore” and “folk-lore” reveals “the hidden history of the biological evolution of an organism-in-life” (32). The natural adeptness of this organism-in-life in adapting to the ecosystem through various body movements, ‘body vocabulary,’ and socio-cultural practices like martial arts, dance, myths, and legends underscores the organicity of its symbiotic connection with the natural environment. Kanhailal’s theatrical beliefs and practices are rooted in this “accumulated wisdom of the earth” embedded in the archetypal body of his ethnic community (41).

In Meitei society, it is believed that seven elements “organically” work in a person. Five primary elements from nature—namely fire, water, air, earth, and ether—constitute the human body. These five essential elements, as Heisnam Sabitri conveyed, are perceived in her Manipuri culture as *thawai manga* or “the five elemental forces of an organism” (102). ‘Life’ or vitality is “perceived through the sixth element of *mi*... and the seventh element of *loinaba*” (16). *Mi*, though literally means ‘shadow,’ conveys the ‘aura’ of an organism-in-life and *loinaba* (literally, ‘association’) conveys the personal self. The living being made of these seven essential elements is embodied by an intricate mechanism of five senses compounded by the presence of intuition, intellect (of mind and heart) and spirit. Integration of these three—intuition, intellect and spirit—through a conscious sensorial process creates a vital energy and leads to the formation of a ‘natural human body’, a body thus energised and in sync with nature is what an actor in Kanhailal’s theatre can accomplish through a carefully-curated system of psychophysical exercises (including vocal and respiratory drills) rooted in his ethnic ecology as well as the primaeval schema of nature.

It should be noted here that the actor-participants, at the very formative stages of the actor training process, are introduced to the image of *paphal* (a snake-shaped pattern that resembles the number 8) and its symbolic significance. This

symbol represents the harmonious integration of the internal and external realms and the interconnectedness between the body and the surrounding environment. Moreover, this image of *paphal* is associated with the Meitei deity Ibudhou Pakhangba, who is traditionally depicted as “a mighty horned snake with its coils spreading in all four directions and its tail in its mouth, symbolising that the beginning and the end lie in him” (74). This association with a deity adds to this image a religious and spiritual significance, underpinning Kanhailal’s idea of theatre of/as ritual. It has rightly been pointed out that Kanhailal’s actor-training process has emerged from the physical culture of Manipur (Bharucha 24). However, this physical culture is evidently shaped by these undercurrents of a ‘living nature’ and the mythic and (spi)ritual bases of Meitei identity. In “The Cradle of Learning,” Heisnam Tomba demonstrates how the principles of *phaphal* and the *thawai* forces operate as a deep structure in their Meitei cultural practices (Thoidingjam and Zutsi 59). For instance, the number 8, the shape of the *phaphal*, is a recurring element in various traditional dances and activities of the Meiteis. It can be observed in the Leishem Jagoi dance performed by *maibis* (female shamans), the Leipak-leinet-leitai dance, the swordplay of Thang-Ta, the spearplay in the *maram nungshetpa* and *paphal chongba*, and the gestures and movements of the wrist while holding the *cheijing* (the bow) in the Pena.

The organic principles of life perceptible in the gestures and actions of Manipuri people in their everyday lives, in their emphasis on dances and community rituals, festivals, and ceremonial processions, and the very agrarian nature of its society have greatly influenced the acting method and training of actors at Kalakshetra Manipur. By imbibing the underlying principle of these ethnocultural resources, Kanhailal’s actors could retrieve access to the accumulated wisdom of the earth—ancient, hidden and rooted. As they became increasingly aware of the involuntary bodily reflexes when they, say, sneeze, hiccup, yawn, inhale and exhale, they would learn that whatever happens in the mind naturally manifests in an individual’s behaviour and actions. Similarly, through close observation and careful emulation of the natural phenomena, the movements and sounds of animals, the waves, and the profound silence of the wilderness, the actors would revive the sensorial communion with nature and augment the horizon of their body vocabulary. For example, the lessons on “guttural sounds,” the primaeval sounds lying dormant in the human body as humans no longer use them, help the actors recognise quintessential affinities with “the inner voice” of other animals. Again, the knowledge of the innate fluidity in the continuous ebb and flow of the wave or the wave-like motion of a snake makes the actors aware of the virtue of fluidity of movement during an act of performance. The exercises not only stimulate the development of a body vocabulary but also establish a connection between the actor and the earth.

Moreover, the acquisition and assimilation of the wisdom of the earth is achieved through diverse interactions and associations of the actor’s body with the earth. Kanhailal always preferred training in the natural environment, which

allowed his actors to converse freely with natural substances—the non-human species, the earth, and the sky. Even the minimalist performance space—a veritable ‘empty space’—becomes the site where the elements of nature converge and impinge upon each other. The actors can “start a dialogue with the spirit of the space” (41). The actors' bodies, too, become a site where the “harmonious integration of the cognitive and the normative elements in the function of the soul” happens (45). The actors' bodies, now in organic synchronisation with nature, perceive a “life flow” and respond accordingly. “The organic actor performs the body ritual as a spiritual act and with the sheer joy of playfulness that warms up the communion and makes alive the environment of inter-human activity” (49). The bodies, thus, become “capable of radiating the vibrations pertaining to the ‘joy and terror’ of life in its authenticity and originality” as they operate in a ‘controlled trance’ (33). In this state of ‘controlled trance,’ the actors become depersonalised, surrendering to forces greater than themselves. As the body becomes capable of relating the contemporary socio-cultural context of oppression, violence and marginalisation with the ancestral impulses, the archetype of the ‘eternal human’ finds meaning and relevance, incarnating oppression and resistance. The performer “lives in and out of the tale and its images and leaps towards creative freedom, capturing the ritual spirit in order to empower performer and audience alike” (10). The earth-energy revived and assimilated into the actors' bodies permeates the performance, impacting the spectators on sensory and spiritual levels as they get involved. Thus, drama comes to life as instinct, cognition, intellect, and spirit meet, blurring the “specific demarcation of the spectator’s area and the actors’ area” (205).

In Kanhailal’s theatre, thus, one can observe a theatre of fusion that vindicates its firm rootedness in his Manipuri Meitei ecology yet seeks to transcend the ethnocultural specificities: it tries to “bring together what are otherwise regarded as binaries—joy and terror, tradition and modernity, past and present, art and history, voice and silence, physical and psychical—and to utilise them to achieve the highest level of communication” (39). Integral to this understanding is his emphasis on creating a physical language for his theatre. With no heavy sets, light, props, costumes and make-up, the bare bodies of the actors successfully recreate “the forms of social experience on the stage,” and his theatre through a “predominantly non-verbal dramaturgy of rhythm, gestures and movements” crystallises “the most critical realities of oppression and resistance” (32). Thus, it is not surprising that his theatre prioritises performance texts over conventional dramatic texts. In Kanhailal’s own words, “[W]e swallowed the text and absorbed it into our bodies instead of merely verbalising the lines through our mouths, our expression and our gestures” (29). To an extent, this explains why his theatre refrains from becoming an act of mere political sloganeering or an exhibition of propaganda. Instead, it blends the political into the essentially non-verbal, physical idioms of his theatre that embodies the “nuances of the ‘instinct’ of the people” and tries to express it “in the form of a logical, sensuous, and lyrical performance” (38). Trained actors like Sabitri, Heisnam Tomba, and A. Phirojit can easily incarnate

resistance through well-calibrated body movements, gestures, and sheer creativity and spirit. Sabitri's rendition of inner resilience in her performances, particularly in *Pebet* (1975), *Memoirs of Africa* (1985), *Migi Sharang* (1991) and *Draupadi* (2000), not only vindicates her originality as an actor but also reinforces the basic tenets of Theatre of the Earth. Sabitri's performance in *Draupadi*, especially the climactic scene where she stands naked, menacingly confronting the soldier as well as the spectators, shows how the ecology of pain, resistance and resilience in Kanhailal's theatre is at once regional and trans-territorial, profoundly personal and primordially collective. It is now common knowledge that the body language of Draupadi/Sabitri in the climactic scene uncannily prefigured the conventions of protest adopted by the Imas who, unaware of Kanhailal's *Draupadi*, stood naked at the gates of Kangla in July 2004, four years after the first performance of the play, to protest Thangjam Manorama's custodial rape and murder. In such moments, Kanhailal said, the spirit of real life and the spirit his theatre tries to create are 'synchronised,' highlighting a crossover between the theatrical and the political, the temporal and the archetypal (156).

iii.

Kanhailal's works primarily emerge from his deep engagements with his ethnic roots and the larger contemporary socio-cultural realities affecting the land and people of Manipur. Like *Draupadi*, his *Pebet* and *Memoirs of Africa* are born from his continuous interactions with his ecology. Contained in a form typical of his Theatre of the Earth, the plays exude the stamps of organicity so integral to the performance practices of Kalakshetra Manipur. *Pebet* is based on a popular fireside story from his ethnic roots and makes a creative deconstruction (or reconstruction) of that folk narrative "to comment on the political and cultural indoctrination" that as an ethnic community the people of Manipur—particularly the Meitei people—had experienced (Bharucha 33). In such a retelling, the play enacts the complex history of conflicts between the native Meiteis and the Vaishnavites. The conflict is built around the fight between the Cat and Pebet children, whereas the resistance to the oppressive structure is crystallised in the act of defiance of one of the Pebet sons as he "bites the Cat's arse instead of licking it" (35). The play revives the archetype of the 'eternal feminine' as it talks about the struggles of Mother Pebet and how she ultimately succeeds in saving her offspring from the 'predatory attention' of a cat through the astute use of an array of tricks and her innate feminine spirit of resilience. Without any written text, the actors at Kalakshetra Manipur absorbed the performance rituals in their bodies and could revive the rituals of suffering and resistance with studied effortlessness in a sensuous and lyrical performance. The organic method of acting the actors had developed through practice and training helped them exude "a pervasive organicity of movement and gesture in their performance" (24).

Right from the beginning, the play reveals its "ecologically situatedness" as it portrays the procreation rites through deft body movements, gestures, and sounds. The actors who are performing the roles of the Pebet children form a semi-

circle as they lie in a foetal position on the ground. As Mother Pebet starts giving birth, her body reacts in certain convulsive manner that communicates her labour pains. The light hums change into rasping pants, culminating in a scream. As she delivers, she screams the animistic “T E T U,” showing how essential such animistic expressions are to life. As mentioned earlier, this absorption of the animistic expression is tethered to Kanhailal’s philosophy of organic relationship with ecology. Going against the verbosity of dialogues, *Pebet*, like all his plays, taps into the tradition of ethno-oratorio and the inexhaustible domain of guttural sounds. The play reinforces its core strength and flexibility as it crystallises the content in its sonic body, particularly through infinite variations of the two pairs of words—‘PEBET’ and ‘TE TU,’ on the one hand, and ‘NGARA RAU’ and SHAMU-KAKA LILI-KAKA,’ on the other. This reaffirms the capability of the ‘primitive body vocabulary’ in expressing ‘the forms of social experience’ sensorily.

As the actors always prefer embodying the words to uttering them, dialogues become non-essential and superficial in such performance practice. We can find very little use of dialogue in *Pebet*, which is also when Mother Pebet uses it to flatter the Cat and, later, to chase him away. Thus, with less reliance on full-fledged dialogues, the play focuses more on the inspired use of physical language and non-verbal elements. As the actors move around on the stage with innate fluidity and lightness, creating images of oppression and hope, one must ascribe that fluidity and lightness to the actor training process where actors have imbibed the essences of natural substances like waves and cultural practices like Thang-ta. Effortlessly, they can mimic the movements of the birds, slip into different moods and then create pervasive stillness on the stage all of a sudden. Even the ritual of indoctrination in the play, as Kanhailal admitted, is inspired by the ritual of Lukun Thongba, a ceremony to initiate the young boys into the Vaishnavite faith after they attain a certain age.

However, there are plenty of unmistakable political signifiers in *Pebet* that the Manipuri audience could easily relate to. The rhetoric and tactics of the Cat, particularly while indoctrinating the Pebet children, exude uncanny Vaishnavite resonances, underscoring a palpable Meitei-Vaishnavite opposition. In the fantasy sequence, the Cat’s use of the words from the Sanskrit sloka “Janani Janmabhoomischa Swargadapi Gariyasi” to brainwash the Pebet children becomes ironic and sinister as he sets them upon their mother. Instigated and brainwashed, the children pitilessly abuse their mother, symbolically their Manipuri motherland or *Ima Leipak*. As the fantasy sequence suddenly breaks, Mother Pebet retrieves the survival instinct of the ‘eternal feminine,’ tricks the Cat and is reunited with her youngest offspring. In the end, the young Pebet’s shitting on the Cat’s hand, the dejection on the Cat’s face, and the ecstatic flight of the Pebets in a circle of harmony reiterate the polemics of ethnicity lying at the core of *Pebet*.

If the political ecology in *Pebet* is reasonably stated and localised, his *Memoirs of Africa* expands its limits to take on the nature of the elemental, just as



his actor-training practices would expand the horizontal and the vertical depth of the actor's body vocabulary, his receptive and reflexive resonators. The socio-cultural realities and tangled political history of Manipur, no doubt, run as an invisible subtext in the play, but it never lets that heightened sensibility take centre stage. Manipur can be construed as veritable Africa, beset with marks of brutalities and cruelty yet springing up, slowly and certainly like a plant. Besides, the play emerged from a very personal encounter of Kanhailal with L. Samarendra Singh's poem "Aficagee Wakhanda Gee" ("African Memoir") as the poem provided Kanhailal with the motifs of continual struggles and an indestructible regenerative spirit of nature to work with the ritual of suffering and resilience, and to ascertain his belief that 'innocence of life' persists ultimately. The play has no concrete storyline. Instead, it has two different situations contained in an organic whole through the images of persecution, destruction and regeneration. In the first situation, Mi, played by Sabitri, becomes a seed, a sapling, a tree, and finally, a crushed seed through skilful use of body movements and gestures. Closely associated with Mi are two Nupi who, as the performance text suggests, are "young women, half-spirit, half-human, embodying the deepest sources of creativity" (78). They appear to nourish Mi, providing energy and creativity. The three Mimanu constantly jeopardise her existence. In the second section, Mi impersonates a slave, whereas the three Mimanu become cruel landowners who always exploit and torture the slave. The three Mimanu, throughout the play, are presented as "personifications of evil; those cannot be destroyed but are capable of destroying" (78).

Like *Pebet*, *Memoirs of Africa* does not rely on stage props, sets and artificial lights and hardly uses any dialogue. Instead, the play extensively uses the physical language, sounds, and bodies of the actors to communicate its content. Instead of words, we have sounds that creatively use the variations of a basic sound unit: HA HO EE AH. The lyrical interludes that intersperse repetitive scenes of persecution and resilience intensify the emotional aspect by punctuating the sonic pattern in the play. As in *Pebet*, the rhythmic repetition of the basic sounds and patterns here amplifies the haunting quality of the entire theatrical event. What we get is a play with "an aura of ritual" that has an unmistakable presence of his Meitei culture. Of the two plays, *Memoirs of Africa* is more intensely pervaded by the Meitei ritual practices and beliefs. For example, in the "Self-Awareness" section, as Mi starts discovering the body, she follows a pattern that closely resembles the pattern followed in the ritual dances of Lai Haraoba. The use of 'vibratory movement' of the body at different junctures in the play is inspired by the vibratory convulsions the possessed *maibi* experience in a trance-like state. Moreover, the 'vibratory movement' signifies a 'source of energy' as the body in such a trance-like state connects the earth and the ethereal. The attacking movements of the three Mimanu reflect the technique learned from the combat techniques of the Manipuri martial art, Thang-ta. The text uses many such ritualistic elements; Manipuri sounds, rhythms, gestures, and rituals nonetheless form the play's core. However,

what is significant here is that such a pervasive presence of cultural markers from his native tradition situates the play in the Manipuri context.

However, the play transcends that geo-specificity as “the problems of oppression and resistance take on an elemental significance” in the play (75). Here, the main character is identified as Mi, a gender-neutral human entity that is reminiscent of *mi*, the sixth element in the Meitei philosophy of an elemental world. *Mi* incarnates ‘life;’ it is the vitality, the life force. Similarly, in the play, Mi resembles the life force that is constantly under the threat of the spirits of destruction, represented by the three Mimanu. It is like a conflict between the forces of ‘eros’ and ‘thanatos,’ a conflict that is integral to the scheme of things in this universe. It becomes an abstraction of what Bharucha called “the almost primordial memory of oppression that activates the present and may continue to haunt the future,” but it also contains “undercurrents of resistance” and resilience (72). Through the twin images of a tree and a slave, Sabitri/Mi evokes “the sheer magnitude of struggle” (73). Mi is terrorised, tortured, bruised, crushed, uprooted, and killed, yet she exhibits the perennial zeal to come back to life. Mi is the indestructible spirit of resilience in the face of the unending suffering of our everyday existence. Moreover, the absence of fixed names endows the characters with a sense of universality and helps the play transcend the spatiotemporal limits.

Both *Pebet* and *Memoirs of Africa* emerge from Kanhailal’s ‘encounters’ with his ecology, his ethnic roots, and the larger contemporary socio-cultural realities of his time. They abound in images, rituals, beliefs and practices which are inextricably connected to that ecology. Both plays react to the dominant zeitgeist and try, in their own ways, to produce their myths of resilience and resistance. Though both have unravelled the structures of suffering, they are not mere projections of the turbulent emotions of pain and suffering. Rather, they embody a sustained gesture towards resilience and regeneration, a hope of liberation amidst the unending cycle of pain and anguish. That hope is evoked through the highly energised body of the organic actor in a trance-like state, making the performance an act of ritual. This ‘ritual’ spirit, an integral part of his Theatre of the Earth, recreates a strong sensorial environment of faith where the memories of the community’s dreams, aspirations, sufferings and traumas are revoked, released and then communicated. The audience confronts these memories and is compelled involuntarily to make sense of those images. As the audience-participant navigates through those images, the organic values and wisdom of the community transpire, facilitating a sensitive and interactive inner communion between performers and spectators. When such communion happens, the ‘accumulated wealth of the earth’ is fused into the contemporary realities, and the ‘ecology of pain’ transforms into an ‘ecology of hope.’ The naturalised actor, who is an “athlete of the senses, the heart and the soul,” then occupies “a state of creation” in tune with the aesthetic parameters of the Theatre of the Earth (Thoidingjam and Zutsi 225). Thus, our due understanding of the syncretic vision at the core of his philosophy is crucial for realising the pedagogic value of Kanhailal’s Theatre of

the Earth. The most prominent aspect of this philosophy is that his theatre regards nature as a living entity and talks about its shaping power and overarching influence. However, it also consciously works towards experiencing a holistic view of human nature in the absolute convergence of minds and hearts. Thus, it was not surprising when Kanhailal took up Tagore's *Dakghar* in 2006 for his next performance and instantly found an abiding connection with Tagore's vision of Amal, where Amal's turbulent journey is symbolic of a man-in-life whose soul seeks freedom through a holistic integration of heart and mind, of intuition, intellect and spirit. If perceived, this wisdom of syncretic presence can ameliorate the anthropogenic rift.

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