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Women, Mourning, and Memory in Ratan Thiyam's *Manipur Trilogy*

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Abstract

In Ratan Thiyam's *Manipur Trilogy*, women emerge as custodians of collective mourning and memory-work, embodying a generative force that performs spiritual and political resistance through maternal care, ritual witnessing, and intergenerational storytelling. In *Wahoudok*, seven celestial nymphs nourish the newly created king with ambrosia, establishing maternal nurturing as foundational to cultural continuity. In *Hey Nungshibi Prithivi*, these nymphs incarnate as war widows and bereaved mothers who witness genocides in Hiroshima and Cambodia, transforming grief into ethical and historical testimony. In *Chinglon Mapan Tampak Ama*, mothers light lamps and sing lullabies to transmit cultural memory to future generations. Rather than portraying mourning as passive emotion, Thiyam theorizes it as the foundation of cultural survival. Situated within Manipur's experience of state violence and militarization, the trilogy's emphasis on women's mourning becomes counter-archival resistance against dominant narratives of erasure. Through close textual analysis, this paper argues that cultural survival depends not merely on remembering the past, but on how communities mourn, transmit memory, and sustain care under conditions of violence.

Keywords: Cultural survival, memory, decoloniality, ritual, women

i.

Ratan Thiyam, one of the most influential figures in the Theatre of Roots movement that emerged in the 1970s as a critical response to Western-dominated theatrical practices in India, affirmed, like his contemporaries Habib Tanvir, K. N. Panikkar, and Girish Karnad, that indigenous theatrical practices possess profound aesthetic, ethical, and philosophical resources for engaging modern socio-political realities while remaining deeply connected to ancestral memory and spiritual knowledge systems. For Thiyam, the vitality and relevance of contemporary theatre lie fundamentally in its rootedness in the specific cultural, spiritual, and political contexts of communities. He developed a mythic-political theatre grounded in Manipuri classical and folk traditions. Founded in 1976, his Chorus Repertory Theatre rejected the fashionable tendencies to view indigenous forms as pristine or immutable artifacts and employed instead a fusion of ritualized, non-naturalistic performance vocabularies with explicitly political subject matter.

Thiyam's theatrical practice incorporated the Manipuri performance traditions, including Ras Leela, classical Manipuri dance, and the martial art of Thang-ta to address the pressing contemporary realities—histories of trauma, loss, and state violence that afflict contemporary life in Manipur. Drawing on cosmological narratives from the Manipuri Purana, his productions would often place myth in dialogue with present-day experiences of violence, displacement, and cultural erosion, demonstrating the fact that forms deeply rooted in indigenous traditions often speak most powerfully to contemporary political crises. Such an approach positions Thiyam and his theatrical engagements as a form of decolonial resistance, more so when one considers the specific conditions under which the Chorus Repertory Theatre operates in Manipur. Theatre there functions simultaneously as an essential mode of cultural survival and as a dangerous political act. In a context of military occupation,

strict censorship, and state control over public discourse, Thiyam's essential commitment to telling stories of violence, honouring the dead, and asserting the right of communities to remember and mourn have made his works inherently risky and explicitly interventionist.

Thiyam's *Manipur Trilogy*—comprising *Wahoudok* (Prologue), *Hey Nungshibi Prithivi* (My Earth, My Love), and *Chinglon Mapan Tampak Ama* (Nine Hills, One Valley)—must thus be understood not merely as an artistic achievement but as a form of cultural and political intervention rooted in a richly layered artistic, political, and ethical framework. The trilogy integrates cosmic myth, historical trauma, and contemporary political consciousness into a unified theatrical vision that refuses any separation between the spiritual and the political. Across the plays, Thiyam positions women not as victims of violence but as active agents of cultural survival, and demonstrates how theatre grounded in indigenous traditions can speak to urgent contemporary crises, and how women's mourning practices constitute forms of political and spiritual resistance that dominant institutions systematically attempt to silence.

While critical engagement with Ratan Thiyam's theatre has been substantial, much of the existing scholarship has primarily focused on analyses of ritual aesthetics, mythic symbolism, cultural nationalism, and indigenous performance vocabularies within the Theatre of Roots movement. Studies have frequently emphasized Thiyam's use of non-naturalistic staging, corporeal discipline, and cosmological frameworks as modes of resisting Western theatrical paradigms or asserting postcolonial identity. Although crucial for establishing Thiyam's significance within modern Indian theatre, these approaches have often overlooked or under-examined the gendered dimensions of his work—particularly women's mourning, care, and memory-work as structuring principles of his Manipur-centred performances. This paper intervenes in that critical gap by foregrounding women not merely as mythic symbols but as active agents enacting ethical witnessing, cultural transmission, and political resistance. By reading *Wahoudok*, *Hey Nungshibi Prithivi*, and *Chinglon Mapan Tampak Ama* through the lens of mourning and memory, the paper shifts attention from spectacle and ritual form to the labour of care, testimony, and remembrance that sustains communities under conditions of violence and historical erasure. Such a focus allows for a rethinking of Thiyam's theatre not only as an aesthetic or nationalist project but as a gendered ethics of survival, in which women's embodied practices of nurturing, grieving, and transmitting knowledge emerge as foundational to cultural continuity and resistance in militarized postcolonial contexts.

ii.

Thiyam's *Manipur Trilogy* opens with cosmic creation, but what is striking is that this is not a solitary masculine enterprise. *Wahoudok*, the first play, establishes the mythic origins of the universe according to Meitei cosmology. The play opens with a narrator, Ojha Sheishakpa, who invokes the Almighty Lord (*Pu Atingkok*) through the *pena*, a traditional string instrument. However, the actual labour of creating a viable human form is attributed to the Divine Mother (*Lairembi*) and her seven manifestations, the *Lai Nurabising* or the Divine Nymphs. The creation of man is depicted as a failure of the "sons of the Almighty" that only the Mother can rectify. She here emerges as the source of creative knowledge itself. Rather than creating directly, she teaches her sons how to replicate divinity, thereby positioning knowledge-transmission as the primary feminine act. Thus, after their initial failed attempts to create human beings, resulting in lesser beings like fish, toads, and monkeys, the Divine Mother provides crucial guidance: she instructs her sons to observe their father and model their creations in the image of the Almighty. It is through maternal instruction that human

beings finally come into existence, created limb by limb, part by part, receiving life from the divine (Thiyam 22-25).

Following this scene of cosmic birth, seven celestial nymphs emerge as mothers and guardians of humanity, as the primary nurturers of the newly created king. In one of the scenes, they gather around the infant and feed him ambrosia, the food of the gods (30-31). This nourishment is accompanied by ritual lullabies and maternal presence. The nymphs, as the stage direction shows, hum lullabies as they suckle the infant, linking physical nourishment with spiritual transmission through sound, breath, and bodily proximity. The lullaby—"Herilo Herilo Heiyute Heiyate"—becomes a refrain that echoes through the entire trilogy, a maternal incantation that binds together creation, nurturing, and cultural knowledge transmission across generations. Their act of nursing the king thus establishes a distinctive model of authority and kingship. The king needs not rule by force or by autocratic power; rather, his legitimacy derives from his relationship to maternal care and maternal knowledge. True authority, the play suggests, emerges from one's capacity to receive care and, presumably, to extend care to others. This inversion of conventional hierarchies disrupts patriarchal assumptions about political power, suggesting instead that all human authority, including royal authority, rests upon the foundation of women's caring labour.

However, immediately after this scene of cosmic harmony and nurturing abundance, the play introduces scenes of catastrophe. Male seers and wise men foresee civilization's collapse and impending doom. They prophesize an apocalyptic future where men will become beasts, love will disappear, the rich will wage endless wars against the poor, and violence will proliferate across all directions and dimensions. The fundamental paradox inherent in the plays of this trilogy becomes clear: women are creators and nurturers of life in a world that is fundamentally committed to death and destruction. History, as the play presents it, moves inexorably toward dissolution, suggesting that the nurturing work of the nymphs will ultimately prove insufficient to prevent civilization's decline. This sets the stage for the plays that follow, in which women must respond to violence through ritual practices of mourning and remembrance that refuse to allow suffering to be erased from historical memory. The lullaby itself becomes both a comfort and a warning—a maternal voice that acknowledges the fragility of the world even as it promises protection and continuity. Women's care work, the play insists, is neither naive optimism nor escapism but rather hard-won resistance against overwhelming odds. These theatrical frames, according to Richard Schechner, can challenge conventional power structures and reveal alternative social possibilities (118).

If *Wahoudok* establishes women as creators and nurturers, then *Hey Nungshibi Prithivi* positions them as witnesses to global violence. The seven celestial nymphs, assuming the form of birds, fly across the world to observe human cruelty in contemporary times. Incarnated now as victims of global conflict, they witness the "horrendous images of the past" including the atomic destruction of Hiroshima, the genocide of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, and the seven-year devastation of Manipur by the Burmese. They, as the play unfolds it, are captured, imprisoned, and violated in these scenes of mass violence. Upon returning home, they recount their testimony to audiences gathered in the theatre, unravelling the horrific nature of modern violence. This modern age has rendered women and children as the weakest and most vulnerable members of society as they become easy prey to systematic brutality. The virtues and accomplishments of previous generations—the hard-earned wealth, righteousness, beauty, benevolence, humility, and respect—are erased by the violence of the contemporary world. The nymphs' testimony reiterates the fact that war destroys not only

bodies but the moral and cultural foundations upon which human civilization rests. By having celestial figures observe and testify to earthly destruction, the play suggests that violence constitutes not merely a human tragedy confined to individual nations or moments but a transgression against the cosmic order itself. Again, the nymphs' vulnerability—their identification as members of the weaker section of humanity—paradoxically becomes the source of their moral authority. Because they are vulnerable, their testimony matters; they speak from a position of particular exposure to violence and from the embodied knowledge that comes from surviving it. This is what Hartman calls "wayward" testimony—testimony that emerges from those excluded from official archives and institutional recognition (Hartman). Such testimony carries its own truth even when it cannot be verified through conventional documentary means.

In the Hiroshima sequence, one of the incarnated nymphs provides a searing first-person testimony of the atomic bombing (Thiyam 61-65). She describes her confusion and disorientation in the moment immediately following the detonation, recounting memories of schoolchildren and ordinary routines suddenly interrupted by apocalyptic destruction. She conveys the sensory shock of the explosion itself—the blinding light, the deafening sound. Her testimony moves from personal experience to images of cosmic devastation: the massive cloud formation rising over the city, the charred landscape where green forests once stood, the obliteration of the natural world. She invokes the haiku masters Basho, Shiki, Issa, and Buson, suggesting that the destruction is so total that it erases not merely human lives but the very possibility of aesthetic contemplation and literary beauty. A bomb that destroys cherry blossoms also destroys the possibility of future poets celebrating those blossoms in refined verse. This layering of references forces audiences to recognize that the casualties of war extend far beyond the dead to include the silencing of cultural voices, the destruction of artistic tradition, and the erasure of possibilities for beauty and meaning. The performance on stage creates what might be called a transnational archive of loss. Manipuri theatre speaks for Japanese poets and their lost world, for Cambodian mothers and their silenced voices, for all those whose voices have been systematically eliminated by violence.

The Cambodia sequence dramatizes maternal anguish at its extreme, portraying a bereaved mother, deprived of family, home, and sustenance, wandering the killing fields with her unresponsive child (70-72). Her monologue embodies the impossibility of motherhood under genocide: she persists in the effort to nourish life within a landscape of death. The child's silence signifies a collapse of emotional and bodily vitality, while the mother's futile care becomes an act of resistance against annihilation. This scene inversely mirrors the opening nourishment in *Wahoudok*, where divine nymphs successfully fed the infant king. In Cambodia, the maternal act is rendered futile, transforming a civilizational ideal into an impossible demand. Yet the mother's continued effort—her refusal to relinquish care—reclaims dignity within devastation and exposes both the limits and the ethical endurance of maternal love under extreme violence. This also asserts a kind of resistance in the face of attempted dehumanization.

However, the nymphs, after witnessing such catastrophes, return home and complete an unfinished weaving—a ritual memorial practice that gathers into its threads the scenes and stories of violence they have witnessed (75-77). This cloth becomes a material monument to their testimony, a physical object that represents the effort to preserve memory in material form. Though it is presented to the divine with prayers for peace and restoration, it neither resolves violence nor substitutes for justice. Rather, it is an offering and a prayer—an attempt to transform witnessing into action, to convert grief into spiritual petition. Yet its transience

underscores the fragile temporality of all memorial acts. It is in this paradox that Thiyam locates the essence of mourning: communities must find ways to preserve and honour memory even though memory itself is always slipping away, always in danger of being forgotten. The weaving itself becomes an act of mourning, each thread a prayer, each gesture of binding a refusal to let the dead be forgotten.

The final play, *Chinglon Mapan Tampak Ama*, moves from cosmic creation to historical crisis to future restoration. The setting shifts to nine concentric hills surrounding a valley, an erstwhile paradise that has lost its spiritual and cultural glory. The opening ritual performed by seven old women, the sentinels guarding the cultural traditions of the land, seeks to placate evil spirits and invite protective forces (Thiyam 83-85). The women perform a ceremony in which they symbolically close doors leading to the land of the dead and open doors leading toward the land of the living. They command destructive forces—represented by the sword—to return to their sheaths and cease their violence. This act of ritual mourning is simultaneously defensive and creative. The women mourn what has been lost—broken temples, endangered culture, spiritual corruption—precisely in order to preserve what remains and to open pathways toward renewal and spiritual restoration. The ritual acknowledges death without surrendering to it; the symbolic closing and opening of doors suggests that memory-work itself functions as a technology for maintaining life in the face of death. By performing these rituals, the old women assert that the living still possess agency, that communities can redirect spiritual and social forces away from destruction and toward regeneration and healing.

The primary work of cultural restoration, however, falls to mothers and to the practices of intergenerational transmission. The play indicates that wise men (*Maichous*) and celestial nymphs collaborate to compose a new "book of knowledge" containing wisdom about freedom, peace, spirituality, politics, economics, human rights, and the duties required of human beings in contemporary times (100-103). Yet writing this knowledge is only the first step; transmitting it to actual children, to the next generation, becomes the mothers' essential work. Diana Taylor, while speaking on "the archive and the repertoire," demonstrates how embodied, live transmission—through performance, gesture, and ritual—preserves cultural knowledge in ways that written documents cannot (19). The mothers' lullabies exemplify this repertorial transmission, passing memory and wisdom through the body and through sound. For example, the lullaby— "Moon…mon…tender moon / Let me carry your dolly-child on my back"— effortlessly connects individual motherhood to cosmic patterns of care where the moon becomes a model for the kind of endurance and faithfulness that mothers teach their children: the capacity to return, to persist, to illuminate darkness without imposing force, to provide steady light without demanding response. The lullaby's simplicity, its reliance on sound, rhythm, and repetition, makes it a mode of transmission that cannot be easily suppressed or regulated by state authorities. A mother singing to her child transmits knowledge and wisdom that no apparatus of control can fully monitor or prevent (Thiyam 106-107).

The final image in the play crystallizes this vision of memorial and nurturing work extending into the future: lamps that are lit on the hilltops and in the valley (106-107). The act of lighting lamps, as symbols of memorial practice, represents a commitment to keeping memory alive, to preventing darkness from completely consuming the landscape of history and meaning. Mothers, overseeing this illumination and singing lullabies to their children, suggest that the preservation of memory and the cultivation of hope are themselves acts of maternal love that sustain communities through darkness and despair. Each lamp represents a

refusal to forget, a commitment to keeping alive the memory of what was lost and the vision of what might yet be recovered. Importantly, the play emphasizes that memory-work is not static, nostalgic, or merely preservationist. The mothers and wise men continuously rewrite and reinterpret ancestral knowledge for contemporary needs. This active engagement with tradition—adapting inherited wisdom to address current crises—reflects an understanding that living traditions must evolve in response to historical change. In a region under military occupation and subject to state regulation of education, such embodied, oral transmission becomes a form of resistance to state control over what is taught and remembered. Mothers singing lullabies cannot be censored; their embodied knowledge transmits what official documents cannot capture. The body itself becomes an archive, a repository of cultural wisdom that survives even when written records are suppressed or destroyed.

iii.

Understanding the works of the Chorus Repertory Theatre in general and Thiyam's *Manipur Trilogy* in particular requires attention to Manipur's political situation. Since 1980, Manipur has been subject to the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), a law granting the military extensive powers to search, arrest, and detain without judicial oversight. The Indian state's characterization of Manipur as a site of insurgency requiring military control has meant that representations of Manipuri culture, history, and struggle have often been marginalized in national discourse. In such context, for Thiyam and the Chorus Repertory Theatre, theatre becomes a space where stories that dominant institutions seek to suppress can be told and witnessed. The *Manipur Trilogy*, by centering women as mourners, witnesses, and memory-keepers, enacts what might be understood as memorial resistance: the insistence that communities possess the fundamental right to mourn their dead, to tell stories of violence, to pass down memory to future generations, and to imagine alternative futures rooted in those remembered experiences. When mothers light lamps in *Chinglon Mapan Tampak Ama*, they perform an act that challenges the authority of the state to determine what will be remembered and what will be forgotten. Segato demonstrates how state violence operates through systematic dehumanization, and how acts of mourning and ceremonial remembrance constitute resistance to this dehumanization (34). By mourning collectively and ritually, communities affirm the full humanity of those erased by violence and refuse state narratives that render their suffering invisible or acceptable.

Thiyam grounds this memorial practice in live performance, suggesting some memories evade archival control and institutional regulation. Performance exists only in the moment of its happening and in the memories of those who witness it. When women on stage sing lullabies, incarnate victims of violence, weave cloth, and light lamps, they create ephemeral monuments to suffering and hope that cannot be fully captured, erased, or regulated. While performance's ephemerality resists state memory control, the theatre stage becomes a counter-public sphere where alternative narratives circulate and audiences bear witness to suppressed truths. This unmarked nature of performance—its refusal to leave permanent traces—paradoxically becomes a site of political power and resistance (Phelan 146). Spectators become mourners and memory-keepers, sharing responsibility for historical consciousness. Thiyam's practices echo Hirsch's "postmemory," enabling audiences—through stories, images, and rituals—to participate in memorial work despite lacking direct experience of the violence (Hirsch 5-12). Thus, collective performance forges communities of remembrance asserting historical rights against narrative suppression. Moreover, Thiyam's use of highly theatrical, non-naturalistic performance—featuring mythological figures, ritualized gestures, and symbolic objects—allows contemporary political violence to be

understood in relation to cosmic struggles between creation and destruction, life and death, memory and forgetting. This theological dimension of the theatre distinguishes it from other forms of political activism, suggesting that memorial work is not merely political but spiritual in nature.

In the *Manipur Trilogy*, Thiyam constructs a coherent and powerful vision of how women's mourning and memory-work operate as generative forces within communities struggling against violence, marginalization, and cultural erasure. The plays move from the cosmic realm, where nymphs serve as creators and nurturers of humanity, through the devastated contemporary world, where these same figures witness and memorialize global violence, to a future moment where mothers sing lullabies and light lamps to preserve what has been and nurture what will be. At each stage, mourning is presented not as a passive response to suffering but as an active, transformative practice through which women ensure that what matters most—love, culture, history, hope, spiritual truth—is preserved and transmitted to future generations.

In Manipur and other postcolonial contexts marked by state violence and cultural marginalization, the right to mourn, to witness, and to transmit memory acquires particular political urgency. Within Thiyam's theatrical vision, women's grief, testimony, care work, and commitment to intergenerational transmission are not supplementary to political struggle but foundational to it. The *Manipur Trilogy* refuses to grant violence the final word; instead, it insists that communities endure through the sustained practices of remembering, grieving collectively, and passing wisdom from one generation to the next. Mothers singing lullabies, lighting lamps, and tending to the living are not retreating from political reality but engaging in its most fundamental struggle—the preservation of dignity, humanity, and hope against forces dedicated to erasure. By positioning women as the primary agents of memorial and cultural survival, Thiyam challenges hierarchies that privilege masculine authority and coercive power, suggesting that true strength lies not in the capacity to wage war but in the ability to sustain life and memory across generations. The trilogy ultimately offers not resolution but orientation: a vision in which mourning well becomes a mode of resistance, care becomes an ethical practice, and memory itself emerges as the ground upon which more just futures may be imagined.

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Bio-Note

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