

In Search of Universal Peace in Ratan Thiyam's *My Earth, My Love*

- A.J. Sebastian sdb

Abstract: *My Earth, My Love* revolves around myth and history, depicted in time past and present, as the dramatist dwells on Manipur's horrendous past. The seven mythical celestial nymphs weave a cloth at the loom to be offered to God, the Almighty, as their love offering to ward off warfare and destruction. The seven sisters represent human longing for peace and brotherhood. As they have premonitions of a bleak future, Puwari, the personification of history, recounts the prophesies on Nostradamus about Hitler's atrocities and the bombing of Hiroshima. The eldest nymph gathers information from her six sisters about pain and destruction in different parts of the world.

Keywords: Almighty; Maibis (priestesses); Puwari; revolution; genocide; Ground Zero; extermination; harmony.

Through *My Earth, My Love*, hinged on the wheel of time, Manipuri dramatist Ratan Thiyam, makes an appeal for peace and harmony in the world. Mixing the past and the present with myth and history, he unearths a new form in dramatic presentation. The play revolves around the horrendous past of warfare and destruction such as: devastation of Manipur by Burmese army; killing during the World War II; Russian revolution and the mass killings; Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour; bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki; genocide during Khmer Rouge regime in Kampuchea. The play is presented with a mythological background of seven sisters, the celestial nymphs, busy at the loom weaving a cloth which is the traditional symbol of love, peace and honour. They are to offer it to the Almighty, with a prayer to stop all warfare and destruction, ushering in an era of peace and brotherhood. The dramatist has personified history in the form of *Puwari* an old man. There are nymphs that fly around like birds and incarnated human beings. They recount the past bloodshed, flying around the world through the pages of history. The play climaxes as the nymphs offer the cloth they have woven to the Almighty. They become the peace loving citizens of the world.

The prologue begins with a prayer song sung with the accompaniment of *pena* (traditional Manipuri bow and string instrument), invoking Divine blessings and forgiveness.

O Lord | Lord of the Lords

O Mother Goddess
 in your divine courtyard
 we, Your humble servants,
 are offering a length of cloth
 please accept it wholeheartedly,
 O Father
 forgive our sins(Thiyam 50).

Seven dancers armed with spears and shields, recount the story of blood shed. Seven females wearing golden masks dance as well. They are the seven sisters, the celestial nymphs who can take any form. They had flown around the world as birds and have taken human form. The nymphs are *Hi-pokpi*, *Yui-pokpi*, *Hi-leima*, *Yui-leima*, *Hikubi*, *Yaikubi*, and *Yaishra*. A ballad is sung about the creation of the world from bamboo leaves and the adventures of the seven nymphs. The eldest nymph remains perched on a loom in the form of a bird as the other nymphs fly away.

The first scene represents the seven sisters narrating their experience of conflict and warfare throughout the world. The nymphs act as *Maibis* (priestesses) and they communicate with an unseen Force, foreboding of a bleak future. *Puwari*, an old man, personified history recounts the prophecies on Nostradamus about Hitler's atrocities and the bombing of Hiroshima, while *Hi-leima*, the nymph, flies off to Japan to collect news of the bombing. The eldest nymph gets all the information from her six sisters. The first nymph recounts the seven years of devastation in Manipur by the Burmese forces. Several children had been killed with the smoke of burning chillies. Thousands had been tied with cane-splits passed through the slits in their ears and dragged into slavery. The second nymph speaks of the suffering meted out to the women and children by the marching soldiers. The sixth nymph gives further details of people who were killed, some while lying prostrate, others standing or sitting, unable to bear the torture. The nymphs in one voice recount the stories of suffering and death:

First nymph: Seven –year devastation is over. Genocide by suffocating with the smoke of burning chillies is also over...

Second nymph: In this gruesome age of savages, we, the weaker section, women and children, would become their beast of prey.

Third nymph: Amidst the frightening and unfathomable tortures and extermination.

Fourth nymph: Vanished are the humans of yesterday...

Fifth nymph: The smell of blood is in the air; dead bodies...

Sixth nymph: Dying while standing upright, sitting, lying prostrate, face up, sideways and upside down, before one could shout, after shouting, after moaning unable to bear the excruciating pain... (53-54).

The eldest nymph engages in conversation with the youngest nymph, asking her to recount her experience while flying around the world. She speaks with gloom: "...A petite flower was blooming,/ a small frightened

one./The lovely tiny flower/ was quite enchantingly beautiful/...I had extended my hands/ to pluck and adorn it on my ears./ ... Taking me to be a human being/ the flower lamented...don't touch me...I hate the stench of humans”(55-6). Giving such a message of hatred for human kind for perpetrating atrocities, the nymph keeps rolling on the ground in agony. The elderly nymph consoles her saying that fighting and killing among human kind has been their heritage. She opines that even communicating with the Almighty would reveal the same. The nymphs leave and are seen communicating with each other. The Unseen Force tells them to appease the Immortal Mother to ward off disasters. After communicating with the Unseen Force, the nymphs leave. *Hi-Leima*, taking the form of a bird, perches on the loom. The old man *Puwari* is seen pulling a cart full of dead bodies and other articles he has collected. He speaks of *Konok Thengra*, a scholar, who wrote about the passage of time in *Puya* where all the dead scholars worried about the condition of the earth. He also begins to paint pictures of humanity through the ages. He calls himself 'History' personified, used to picking up dead bodies of those killed in man's inordinate hunger for power. He further begins to tell *Hi-leima* about predictions of Nostradamus – on the World Wars and the inhuman tortures and genocide; on massacres by Hitler, Mussolini and Russian soldiers; on Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbour and the subsequent US bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The old man busies himself making something out of the articles in his cart. After completing his task, *Puwari* begins to talk again giving details of the bombing of Hiroshima for which Naval Captain William D. Parsons was responsible:

At 0245 hours, on the 6th of August, we took off from the Italian Air Base.

At 0300 hours, we checked the trigger for dropping the bomb for the last time.

At 0605 hours, we flew over Iwo Jima, towards Japan.

At 0741 hours, we received weather clear report of our third target.

At 0904 hours, we changed our course to the west.

At 0915 hours 30 seconds we dropped the bomb (62).

Scene-II opens as *Hi-Liema* is seen trapped under a fallen tree, experiencing excruciating pain and immobility. She recollects how she had seen children go to school in the morning when explosion took place. Bright circular objects flared up as the sky darkened. The city was covered with a mushroom shaped cloud and spiral clouds hung above the city. Countless men, women and children died. No one was there to assist the injured who cried for help. Seeing everything destroyed, *Hi-liema* agonising in pain, flies away. She limps back home as she cries aloud, “I'm dying, I'm dying. Please save me. I'm dying of thirst, a drop of water, a drop of water...please. Water...water” (64). Her sisters embrace and console her.

The third scene opens as *Puwari* is seen fixing crosses at the cemetery and offering flowers at the graves. He keeps uttering words of remembrance of the departed ones. After his round, he climbs on his cart and salutes as bugle sounds. He also reads out the names of a few soldiers who lost their lives.

In the fourth scene *Puwari* visits the house of the nymphs. The eldest nymph is busy weaving cloth. As the old man calls out and walks in, dragging his cart along, the nymph is delighted to behold him. He dances around joyfully. *Hi-pokpi* invites him to rest for a while and puff tobacco and drink *Manthak* brew from gourd-bottle. He tells her how she broods over the unsettled times of suffering. She speaks out, “The Earth is suffering like anything, *Epu*. The story of killing never ends. War after war, war-mongering cowards –I’m at a loss, *Epu*, how will the future generation survive amidst the smoke of revenge, punishment and genocide” (67). He joins her thoughts and speaks of his despair pulling his cart full of dead bodies, since love has vanished in the wake of hatred and revenge. *Yai-leima*, tells about her plan to visit Angkor Wat to see the genocide in Cambodia during the Khmer Rouge regime. *Hi-pokpi* requests the old man to stop *Yai-leima* from her trip. But he is of the opinion that she should go on her mission. He also wishes to follow her and pick up dead bodies from the battlefields. *Puwari* pulls *Yai-leima* into his cart to make the journey. *Hi-pokpi* muses on the wisdom of human society and the untold suffering caused by warfare throughout human history.

In the fifth scene *Yai-leima* appears in the form of a widow, a victim of Khmer Rouge regime, trying to nurse her dehydrated and starved child. She tries to make her child open his eyes. She is unable to feed him with her breasts gone dry due to starvation and malnutrition. But her child doesn’t respond to her call: “What happened? What happened to you? Cry, cry out – at least once, cry out, my child...my child has refused to cry, do you hear me?” (72). As she wails and sobs, she turns into a bird and flies away.

In the sixth scene, four of the nymphs fly away to West Asia and Europe to observe the devastation wrought about by warfare. *Hi-pokpi* is worried about their safety. Suddenly the nymphs transform themselves into four war victims. They are kept in prison and tortured. The soldiers rape them, leading to their giving birth to bastard children they detest. One of them cries out: “War, you have made us prostitutes/War, you have made us prisoners/War you have made us bonded slaves.../The lump of blood growing day by day...growing in my womb” (73). She cannot accept the babe growing in her womb, the child of rape. Though she could hear it call her ‘Mother...Mother’, she hated it as the leftover of some inhuman one. She even pleads, “Why don’t you die in the womb./Why are you torturing me,/ over and over again?/ It’s unbearable – it’s unbearable./ Mother! Mother! Mother!” (74). After she gives birth to her unwanted

child, she holds it in her arms and pleads how she could purify her defiled body. "With what face can I stand before my husband and relatives? I hate myself for being alive" (75). Her anguish is so deep rooted, she decides to commit suicide. As the sequence changes, four bodies of women are shown hanging with ropes from branches of trees. A baby is shown lying in a corner. Mother Teresa comes in with her sisters and picks up the child and carries it in her arms. The four women turn into birds and fly away.

In the epilogue, the playwright presents the eldest nymph, weaving cloth as her sisters stand beside her. She sings: "O boat, o boat, you seem not to be moving./ I'm taking the Almighty on board./...we carry humans, like small children./ But, the enemy among the humans never ceases" (76). For her, what is left behind is only a river of blood as she wants to complete weaving the cloth. They all want to cut the cloth and dance together and offer it to the Almighty, the Creator of living beings. They pray to him to put an end to conflict and war and usher in an era of prosperity, peace and harmony on earth. They put down the cloth as an offering to God praying:

O Father forgive our sins | save us from making mistakes,
with these words | at your divine feet |
we are paying obeisance (77).

As the prayer is offered, the eldest nymph comes under a spell and collapses, while her sisters, the nymphs, turn to birds and fly away. The old man *Puwari* appears crawling. He wraps himself with the cloth they had offered to the Almighty. A languished *Puwari* confesses how he had been made a weakling by the selfishness of mankind. He is determined to write human history in his chest in blood. He pleads with the nymphs to fly away to various places. He asks them to collect the dust from the demolished image of Buddha and sprinkle it all over the corners of the earth with the message of peace. He wants them to offer flowers at Ground Zero where the Twin Towers once stood. He longs for peace to dawn on human kind and meet again the nymphs. "...O birds!... Oh, my dear flags!/ Hey flags, all of you,/ why is United Nations,/ formed by all of you coming together,/ to make the world a better place to live in,/ hiding behind the shadow/ of only the rich countries?/ Punishment is given to/ only the weaker countries,/ why this partiality?" (78). He gives a peep into the various maladies of the world such as: children dying of starvation, sick and diseased who are denied medical care, fathers selling children, humans selling their body parts and the like. Seeing the misery of the world he cries out, "I, *Puwari*, have been made a weakling/ by the selfish nature of human beings./ But, I will continue to write,/ history on my chest/ with blood as ink" (79).

From henceforth *Puwari* would be reduced to an open history book. The play ends with an open history book lying on a wheelchair as UN flags flutter on a platform with frozen birds in flight. The playwright has very

imaginatively woven the theme of his hunger for world peace and harmony, travelling through a ravaged world history, germinating hope of peace in the hearts of his readers. In the play, there is a perfect blending of the traditional Manipuri theatrical technique with contemporary issues, reaching out to a universal audience. The play, thus, projects Thiyam's deep concern for social and spiritual welfare of humanity in the midst of socio-political conflicts and warfare.

Works Cited :

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About the Playwright:

Ratan Thiyam (b. 20 January 1948) is an Indian playwright and theater director, and the winner of Sangeet Natak Akademi Award in 1987. Also known as Thiyam Nemai, Ratan Thiyam is known for writing and staging plays that use ancient Indian theater traditions and forms in a contemporary context. A former painter, and proficient in direction, design, script and music, Thiyam is often considered one of leading contemporary theatre gurus. He is also the founder-director of 'Chorus Repertory Theatre', formed on the outskirts of Imphal, Manipur in 1976 ("Ratan Thiyam." <http://en.wikipedia.org>).



Teej*

Clad in green hue
Nature celebrates *teej*.
Greenery all around
Trees look pleased.
Wishing one another
A bright smile
On face each,
They know joy
Beyond their reach.

Maidens in gardens
Gardens in maidens
One knows not

Medha Sachdev

One from the other.
Singing in gamut
Girls swing in swing,
Going up and down
They rejoice in full swing.

Nature has groomed
Its entire face.
It has lent
Charm and grace
To the maidens
Walking in green
Garden gay glad.

**Teej* is a festival celebrated in Uttar Pradesh (India) in the month of *Savan*.
On this day, women wear green clothes and ornaments, especially green bangles.

