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## A SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF THE MANIPURI FILM OF ARIBAM SYAM SHARMA ISHANOU

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### ABSTRACT:

The aim of the paper is a Semiotic Analysis of Manipuri Cinema of Aribam Syam Sharma. Manipur is of the North Eastern States of India and the language spoken is Meiteilon, a TibetoBurman language family. AribamSyam Sharma is a film director, music director, actor and singer from Manipur. He got World Wide recognition after his film *ImagiNingthem (My Son, My Precious)* received the Grand Prix at the Festival Des Trios Continents at Nantes, France in 1982. Till date, he has directed 14 Manipuri feature films and 28 non-feature films. The methodology used would be semiotics analysis. The primary sources would be the Manipuri film itself. The secondary sources consist of texts written by both local and mainstream writers published as books, journals, articles on websites, etc. The present paper will also try to focus on the Semiotic Analysis of the Manipuri Film of AribamSyam Sharma's *Ishanou*.



**KEYWORDS:** Semiotics, Manipuri Films, *Ishanou*, Maibi, AribamSyam Sharma.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Manipur is one of the Seven States of the North Eastern region of India. The land of Manipur is a place of varied cultures, rituals and traditions. The State comprises of different languages where Manipuri/Meiteilon is the lingua-franca of the State. The Film Industry of Manipur is called Maniwood, like that of Hollywood and Bollywood. The focus of the paper would be AribamShyam Sharma who is a noted Film Director of Manipur. His movie, '*Ishanou*' is chosen for analysis because it is one of the most awards winning Manipuri Film.

The movie deals with the phenomenon of Maibi-ism (Shaman or Priestess) of Manipur. The film won the National Award in 1990. It was also selected in the Uncertain Regard in the 44<sup>th</sup> Cannes Film Festival in 1991. The film has been screened in various International Film Festivals including London, Hawaii, Singapore, Fribourg, Seattle, Vancouver, Festival des Trios Continents, etc. (AribamSyam, 2016, p.253). The semiotic analysis of the film *Ishanou* is important as these films bring out the traditional rituals, customs and simplicity of day to

day life in Manipur. The screenplays of AribamSyam Sharma's movies are mostly written by M.K.Binodini. Their collaboration has contributed immensely in the Manipuri Film Industry.

### 2. INTERTEXTUALITY

The film, '*Ishanou*' is based on the phenomenon of Maibi-ism as seen in the Manipuri or Meitei tradition. Maibis are treated as Shaman or Priestess of the Meitei Deities. The film is based on the screenplay written by M.K.Binodini. The film depicts the ordeals of how the life of a happily married young woman

changes because of Maibichangba (Dwelling of Maibi-ism). According to the Meitei tradition, Maibis are chosen by the Deities and cannot become one by choice. The protagonist, Tampha is forced to leave her loving family and daughter to devote her life to the Meitei Deities because of Maibi-ism.

### 3. STYLE AND FORM

#### 3.1 Synopsis:

The film is based on the life of Maibis of Manipur. The Maibis are sort of Shaman cum Priestess who served the Lainingthou (Meitei Deities) and are considered as the sacred oracles of the Deities. The title of the film is also called the Chosen One as Maibis are chosen by the Meitei Deities and they don't become one by choice. The film narrates the life story of a married woman, Tampha who by fate becomes a Maibi. The peaceful married life of a homemaker Tampha is destroyed by Maibi-ism. It first took place when she was enchanted by the Kwaklei (Blue Vanda) flower and thought that the flower was calling her. Later, she started having fits when she saw a fish brought by her mother to make dinner. She ran out and was found swimming in the pond at night, dancing and running off everywhere. Her family tried to calm her fits and hallucinations by medicine and by tying her up but nothing worked out. The Maibi-ism had taken control of her life and she was forced to leave her sweet family. The film narrates Tampha's journey from a simple married life her sacrifices, her pangs of separation from her beloved family to becoming a devoted Maibi of the Meitei Deities.

#### 3.2 The Cast

The cast of the film were Kiranmala, Kangabam Tomba, Manbi, Dhiren, Baby Molly and Baby Premita. The character of Tampha was played by Anouba Kiranmala. The role of Tampha's mother was played by Eche Manbi and her husband role Dhanabir by Kangabam Tomba. For the role of Tampha, the director needed someone who can dance knew about the risk of acting as a Maibi. There was a belief that if you pretend/ act to be a maibi, you might end up being one. However, if a Brahmin or Sana (Rajkumar) happened to act, then they wouldn't become a Maibi. Luckily, they found Kiranmala who was a Brahmin actress and agreed to play the role of Tampha.

The role of the Guru Maibi was played by a real Maibi and some of her apprentice was also used in the film. Special camps and workshop for a month was also organised so that Kiranmala can get into the character of Tampha. The Maibi dance was taught by Oja Kumar Maibi and pena by Oja Khangemba Mangi and his apprentices. The Maibi troupe and the film shooting were carefully monitored by respected Pandit Achaoba Ngarengbam Oja Khullachandra.

#### 3.3 Cinematography:

##### 3.3.1 Setting:

The film Ishanou was mostly shot in Khongjom, nearby Khongjom area and Lamlai of Manipur. The Lai Haraoba shooting took place in Pandit Ngarengbam Oja Khullachandra's Lamsang house and nearby areas. The film portrays the simple life style of the Manipuri society, their tradition and culture. No distinct special effects were used in the making of this film. The film was based on the life of the Maibis of Manipur. In other words, we can also say that it narrates the life of a woman as a daughter, mother and a Maibi. The film was shoot with real Maibis which wasn't an easy task. During the shoot, one or two Maibis would become possessed by the Meitei Gods which made it difficult for them to continue the shoot. However, the credit goes to the Director for making one of first kind of movie on the life of the Maibis of Manipur.

The sets were constructed for the events of the ear piercing ceremony and the Lai Haraoba like we set up in actual Meitei culture. Here, Lai Haraoba is the festival of the Meitei Deities. They were so natural like the set-up of the functions carried out in the Meitei community. Nothing was left out which makes the film so relatable to the Meitei Community.

### 3.3.2 Lighting

The chosen sections of the film are mostly shot using day light. It is the onset of Maibism on Tampha where she visualized that the Maiba was a horse. The scene starts with the dim candle light in a dark room, while the day light shines outside once the Maiba runs away. Here, the dim dark light and dawn light are used to signify their intense search for Tampha when she runs away from midnight till early morning. The dark light with their torches suggests that it was at the dead of the night that Tampha ran away. Their search continues throughout the night till early morning which was suggested by the day break light.

### 3.3.3 Framing, perspective, camera movements and editing

The Cinematography was done by GirishPadhiar and Assistant cameraman was Ph. Sharatchandra Sharma. The video editing was carried out by Ujjal Nandi. The Re-recording was done by AnupMukhopandhya in the NFDC centre, Calcutta. According to the research paper, "Shot Length and Narrative in Ishanou" by Dr.GaneshSethi and Dr.KamaljitChirom, shots duration of the movie were examined. The shot length could be divided into six sequences or parts. They analysed the film with the help of online software called Cinematics. They found that the shortest shot length in Ishanou was that of 1.2 seconds while the longest shot length was of 103.4 seconds. The average shot length (ASL) of the film was 13.9 seconds and the medial shot (MSL) was 8 seconds. According to this paper, AribamSyam Sharma concentrates more on the longer shot sizes, especially the medium shots and extreme long shots to narrate the story.

### 3.3.4 Sound and Music

The Sound effects was directed by Shantino Sharma and DurgadasMitra and music by AribamSyam Sharma. The Pena masters were Mangi, Komol, Ahanjao, AngouMangang, YaimaMangane. The Dance teacher of the Maibijagoi (maibi dance) wasNganbam Kumar Maibi and R.K. Sanajaoba Singh. The sound effects were very subtle and mystical, especially because of the sound of the Pena (traditional musical instrument). The Pena sound reminds the audience of the Maibis and Lai Haraoba. The musical instruments played and songs were the exact ones the Maibi used during the Lai Haraoba.

### 3.3.5 Costumes and Make-up

The Costume designer wasM.K.Binodini and make up was done by BachhuAhamad. Most of the costumes were the traditional Meitei attire. The individual attire of the people represented and connotes their designation in the Meitei tradition. For example: the 'phanek' (wrap-round) without the blouse wore by Tampha's mother is the actual depiction of how elderly people dress at home. In the earlier scene of the film, Tampha was seen wearing a phanek, blouse and stole of different colours which suggests that she is a married woman. However, her attire changes to plain white phanek and stole which suggests that she had become a Maibi. The Maibi in the Meitei culture are recognised by their plain white dressing.

## 4. SYNTAGMATIC ANALYSIS

The discussed text above is the narrative of the Manipuri film, Ishanou which is based on the life of the Maibis of Manipur. The narrative moves through various scenes of normal happy married life to the chaos created due to the invocation of Maibi-ism in Tampha's married life.

The narrative can be divided into five important scenes:

- (a) The Ear piercing ceremony of Tampha's daughter Bembem and saving up to buy a new scooter, roaming in market, etc. are scenarios of a normal married life.
- (b) The Kwaklei flower which triggers the onset of Maibi-ism in Tampha. The sight of the fish which makes Tampha's mental stability worse and the visualisation of the Maiba as a horse by Tampha.

- (c) Tampha losing her mental stability because of these triggers. The triggers lead her to run away in the middle of the night and she eventually ends up at the house of Guru Maibi (Supreme Head Maibi).
- (d) After Tampha's training as a Maibi is over, she comes home to find her husband and daughters have left her. This makes her realise that her happy days as a married woman are over. She then solely devotes herself to the Deity by becoming a full time Maibi in the Lai Haroaba (Festival organised to please the Meitei Deities).
- (e) Tampha's unexpected meeting with her husband and daughter. Her grief reflected on her face as she tries to stop herself from hugging or touching her daughter. She believed that Maibi's daughter also tends to become a Maibi had forced Tampha to not reveal her identity as the child's mother.

The discussed criterion mentioned above contributes to the whole ensemble syntagmatic structure of the film. The analysis of the syntagmatic structure of the narrative helps us find that the signs are all interlinked with each other.

## 5. SIGNS: SIGNIFIERS AND SIGNIFIED

Ferdinand de Saussure states that a sign consists of a signifier and a signified. The 'signifier' stands for the form which the sign takes and the 'signified' stands for the concept or values it represents. Here, the sign consists of the audio files like dialogue, sound and music effects. The visual signs consist of gestures, facial expression, costumes, colour, lightning, editing, camera angles and movements. The analysis of all these signs helps in the identification of the structure of the narrative or films.

The scene chosen for analysis is when Tampha gets the invocation of Maibi-ism. While walking with her husband, Tampha saw a beautiful Kwaklei (flower). She was enchanted at the sight of this flower and said that the flower was calling her. She plucks the flower and puts it behind her ear as a nachom (flower used as an ornament). This was the sign that Tampha was mesmerised by the flower leading to the invocation of Maibi-ism. The husband unaware of the situation thought that she was just happy to see a beautiful flower. On their return, Tampha starts feeling dizzy and gets sick. There was no change on her behaviour and she was still her own calm self.

The next day, she went to the nearby pond to fetch water. Dhanabir, her husband had asked if she was feeling well and she had said she was. However, when she did not return Dhanabir went to check on her. Only to his surprise to find her swimming in the pond instead of fetching water. Her husband told her to climb up and don't be childish. But she wasn't her calm self anymore, instead she laughed hysterically like as if she was enjoying the swim. Dhanabir helped her to climb out the water finally and she ran ahead towards their home.

The village neighbour, Kanto had earlier come to give Dhanabir's promotion letter was waiting for them in the courtyard. When he saw Tampha running towards the house, he asked how you are feeling now. To his surprise, Tampha laughingly replied "I am Goddess Panthoibi". The shock on his face suggests that he felt something was wrong. This scene was the indication that Tampha was chosen by the Goddess Panthoibi to become a Maibi. Later, her mother got her fish to cook for lunch. At the sight of the fish, she becomes silent and starts sweating, the Pena sound in the background intensifies the atmosphere. The camera was now focused on her now wide open eyes and the fish. Suddenly, she screams and runs away to her room. All this were the signs that the invocation of Maibi-ism was now taking a quick phase on her life. That very night, Tampha is seen dancing with her eyes closed, no music just heavy breathing and silence. She was sleep dancing outside her house in the dead of the night. The silence in the atmosphere intensifies the situation sending chill down the spine. Meanwhile, Dhanabir wakes up and finds that Tampha wasn't on her bed. He opened the door to check and step of the house. On hearing the sound, his mother-in-law gets up to check. She checks the adjacent room (Kitchen), only to find her daughter sleep dancing. Dhanabir also comes running and both of them try to calm Tampha down and put her to sleep.

The next day, she is checked upon by the local maiba and seems fine. She even goes out of her house to buy stuff and appears to be alright. However, at the middle of the night, she wakes up again. The flute sound or music in the background and her sudden actions intensify the atmosphere. She gets out of bed and starts running towards the hills. Her husband also gets up and follows her. He tries to stop her but she was teasing him to catch her. She acts like a crazy sleep walking person and finally her husband takes her inside the house. Next morning, Dhanabir takes her to see the doctor. They thought that she is suffering some mental condition or sleep walking. He even asks the doctor to suggest if there was any better treatment available outside the State. This shows that he really wanted Tampha to become normal and better. However, the doctor's prescription doesn't improve Tampha's condition. In the evening, Tampha got sick again and her sickness continued for some days. The next day, she was taken to the doctor but there was no improvement. As her condition worsened, her mother thought that it would be better to get her checked by the Maiba.

The scene starts in dim candle light and background chanting prayers by the Sugnu Maibi. Tampha is seen sitting there calmly as the maiba continues to chant. In the traditional Meitei belief, sometimes if the allopathic doesn't work, we believe that the Maiba can shoo away the evil spirit if he or she is possessed by one. The Maibi also helps in casting away the bad luck or sickness by doing puja or prayers.

While the Maiba continues to chant the prayers, Tampha kept staring at him. But in her eyes, the maiba appears to be a horse. Then, she suddenly laughs and jumps on the Maiba on his back telling him to run. At the sight, the Maiba gets scared and actually runs away from the house after freeing himself. Tampha becomes hysteric and to calm her down, she is kept tied up on her bed. Dhanabir and her mother take care of her after the doctor comes and administers her injection to calm her. But, in the middle of the night, Tampha runs away from the house. Dhanabir and the locality people went out in search of her with torches lights in hand. As she continues to run aimlessly as if she was enchanted and called to a place, her husband keeps following her. The dim light scene with torches lights to the next scene of dawn signify that the search continues throughout the night. Finally, Tampha finds herself running into the house of the neighbouring locality Guru Maibi (Head Shaman or Priestess). The Guru Maibi hugs her and tells her other apprentice to get tairan, etc to help calm Tampha. This scene signifies that Tampha had been chosen to become a Maibi and only a senior Maibi would know how to calm her down. Dhanabir and the locality people also reach Guru Maibi place in search of Tampha. They try to convince Guru Maibi to let Tampha come back with them but were denied. They were told to come back when Tampha's training as a Maibi would be complete.

It can be concluded that all the symptoms that Tampha was showing were signs of the invocation of Maibi-ism. The Director, Aribam Syam Sharma brilliantly represented the life and struggle of the Maibi groups through this film. Tampha, who led a happy married life, is later forced to leave her family and devote her remaining life to the Meitei Deity. These entire episodes signify how tragically and unwillingly life changes because of Maibi-ism.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The film 'Ishanou' was taken for analysis as it is considered as one of the most successful Manipuri film. However, the success of a film is considered only when the narrative is properly conveyed to the audience despite of being a regional film. For the general audience of Manipur, Maibi-ism is a popular concept. Here, the narrative conveys the desired messages which are carefully scripted in various signs as discussed above. It is the Director's effort that such a traditional concept was made recognised and popular to the larger audience. This was made possible due to the creativity of the director or film maker as well as that of the script writer. It is evident from the fact that the discussed signs are shared by many media texts and some are unique to a specific medium such as that of the camera movement or tracking shot. The camera movement involves of the short length shots, medium length and long shots etc.

The above analysis shows that the certain signs are employed as a common media text study and can be categorised into visual codes, social codes, technical codes and representational codes. We

have seen that the social codes like dress, make up, gestures and language of the characters have helps us analysed their social class or nature. For example: The colourful clothing of the womenfolk represented the normal citizen while the plain white clothing represented the Maibi group.

The technical codes are camera angles, lightings, sounds and music which help the audience in analysing the genre of the movie. The representational codes connote the Director's viewpoints through the narrative and dialogues. The visual codes form a communication code. It helps in interpreting the signs and symbols seen in the film and their meanings. Therefore, we can say that the above mentioned signs help in analysing the structure of the narrative or the film as a whole.

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