Critique
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Revisiting *Ishanou*: A Tale of Identity, Sacrifice and Alienation

Unpacking the intricacies of Aribam Syam Sharma's cinematic universe unveils a profound stratum of historical, cultural, and ritualistic themes deeply rooted in Manipuri identity. This is perhaps why the complex themes in Shyam's films may challenge those unfamiliar with the cultural nuances. Yet, his films demand a deeper level of engagement, inviting viewers into a world where the historical and cultural context is not just a backdrop but an essential part of the narrative. Syam's cinematic masterpiece, *Ishanou* (1990), recently underwent a restoration initiative led by the Film Heritage Foundation and Manipur State Film Development Society. The film's restored version premiered at the Festival de Cannes 2023, featuring in the prestigious Cannes Classic section. It also made its way into several festivals, such as II Cinema Ritrovato, Festivals des 3 Continents, and the Singapore International Film Festival. This restoration revitalises Syam's magnum opus for contemporary audiences and breathes new life into the film, offering cinephiles and critics an opportunity to revisit *Ishanou*.

The film delves into the captivating narrative of a woman grappling with the harrowing experience of spirit possession, ultimately finding refuge in the sacred realm of the *Maibi*, a revered religious figure in *Meitei* tradition who is addressed as a 'mother.' Tampha, a seemingly ordinary woman, lives peacefully in a quaint village in Manipur. Her days are occupied with the mundane tasks of a devoted mother and wife, from arranging her daughter's ear-piercing ceremony to engaging in deliberations with

her husband over buying a second-hand scooter. This initial portrayal anchors the audience in the ordinary, illustrating Tampha's existence within the familiar contours of a conventional, heteronormative family structure where she is even willing to pawn her jewellery to buy her husband's scooter. However, the film artfully fractures this conventional reality, dividing its narrative into two discernible yet intricately interconnected parts. In the first segment, Tampha's life adheres to societal norms, manifesting as an unassuming tableau of familial responsibilities. Here, she dutifully tends to her husband and daughter, threading through the delicate fabric of domesticity. The film's second phase takes a daring departure, immersing the audience in Tampha's tumultuous journey through the realms of spirit possession. Here, she grapples with an otherworldly force, depicted with intensity, as she attempts to escape from the familial space. The sequences unfold with a visceral and almost hysterical fervour, portraying Tampha's desperate attempts to break free from the constraints of her familial role.

Female Body as a Text

In navigating the two narrative dimensions, the film explores the dialectical relationship between the rational and the metaphysical and interrogates the essence of women's identity through cultural referential meanings. The spiritual possession becomes a profound metaphor, challenging societal expectations and unravelling the complex layers of Tampha's sense of self. As she traverses this tumultuous spiritual journey of being a *Maibi*, the audience is compelled to question the boundaries between the ordinary and the extraordinary, the expected and the unexpected. In his book *Living Shadows*, Aribam Syam discusses screenwriter M.K Binodini's desire "to create a story based on the transformation of a woman, with a simple, uncomplicated life, into the dramatic character of a Maibi." In crafting this compelling narrative, the film captures

traditional rituals, dance, and music, serving as a cultural record of the distinctive features of Manipur and its people and challenging the overarching nation-state narrative. As Tampha enters the realm of spirituality and becomes a *Maibi*, the film unfolds the narrative through a series of visual sequences with hardly any spoken words showcasing the cultural nuances of the *Meiteis*. As she becomes a *Maibi*, she is initiated into the world of rituals and traditions. It can be noted that the *Meitei* religious scriptures are not recorded in the form of written words but are in oral forms manifested as spontaneous oracles through spirit possession, and access to this oral scripture in the cultural and religious space is the privilege of the female *Maibi* only. In another sequence, the film carefully portrays the primary and the most important ritual observance of *Meiteis*, the *Lai Haraoba,* in which Tampha is seen

performing the traditional *Maibi* dance. It is also noteworthy that the *Maibi* dance represents the *Meitei* worldview, starting from their creation myth and encompasses various aspects of its culture and life. During her performance in the rituals, Tampha renders how civilisation came into existence through the enactment of the making of the human body, the building of dwelling places like houses, the sowing of plants and harvesting, etc. Her dance performance radically differs from the usual dances, such as those associated with Indian cinema. In *Ishanou*, this prominent cultural subtext suggests that the female body performing the *Maibi* dance transmutes into a religious and cultural text.

The Tragic Sacrifice and Alienation

In *Meitei* culture, it is usually feared that the daughter of the *Maibi* is predisposed to become a *Maibi*. This cultural belief manifests poignantly in the film as Tampha's family, gripped by this fear, makes the heart-wrenching decision to separate Tampha from her daughter. At the same time, she is enrolled in the *Maibi* institution.

Years later, amidst the rituals and dance of a *Lai Haraoba*, Tampha's world collides with the ghosts of her past as she encounters her husband and daughter. The reunion, however, is anything but joyous. As the rituals conclude, Tampha, now fully immersed in her role as a *Maibi*, approaches her husband for a conversation. He does not tell her, yet reveals with his demeanour that he has remarried, and their daughter, now a stranger to Tampha, remains oblivious to her mother's existence. The film transcends the ordinary to delve into the profound agony of Tampha, who not only loses her previous life

to the spiritual realm of the *Maibi* but must also witness the transformation of her daughter into a stranger.

The dialogue between Tampha and her husband unfolds with layers of grief and resignation, painting a heart-breaking picture of erasing one identity to construct another. At this juncture, Tampha's normative maternal identity is obliterated, a sacrificial act to ensure her daughter's upbringing within the confines of a conventional family structure. As they are conversing, Tampha's daughter walks up to her, but unable to recognise her as her biological mother, she greets Tampha and addresses her as 'mother' as one would address a *Maibi*. In this nuanced portrayal of cultural norms, Aribam Syam's *Ishanou* weaves the humane story of sacrifice and alienation.

Subversion of Dominant Paradigms

Even though the sacrificial mother trope often unfolds within the familiar narrative thread of selfless maternal sacrifice for family's sake, *Ishanou* masterfully subverts this conventional notion. Here, Tampha's sacrifices go beyond the mundane domestic life, evolving into a transformative and liberating journey. Unlike the stereotypical portrayal of women

relinquishing personal desires for the sake of their husbands and children, Tampha's sacrifices propel her into the empowering realm of the *Maibi* institution. Stepping into this world, she not only undergoes a profound personal transformation but also assumes the agency to shoulder the responsibility of her community, earning respect in the process. In the broader cinematic landscape, transgressing from traditional family structures often results in female characters being cast as disruptors, labelled as either evil or mentally unstable. Yet, within Syam's cinematic universe, the trajectory taken by women who challenge the dominant paradigm becomes an avenue of transformation. Tampha's embrace of her new identity as a *Maibi* is not a surrender but a claim to autonomy. At the film's end, the pivotal encounter between Tampha and her daughter becomes a poignant challenge to the stereotypical definition of female identity as solely tied to being bearers of children. As the biological relationship crumbles, Maibi's socioreligious identity takes precedence. Through this narrative turn, the film provocatively questions and redefines women's traditionally assigned roles, offering a fundamental commentary on societal expectations. In *Ishanou*, Aribam Syam Sharma crafts a cinematic space where the female journey is not confined to the limiting roles often assigned by mainstream narratives. Tampha's narrative arc is a testament to the transformative power of embracing unconventional paths, challenging established norms, and carving out a unique identity that defies societal constraints and resonates with personal autonomy.

Aribam Syam's Unique Treatment

To craft such a sensitive story and to remain true to the cultural and traditional nuances, Shyam's artistry lies in the treatment of the film with discerning camerawork and mellow acting against the backdrop of the vibrant *Maibi* dance in *Lai Haraoba* to create authenticity.

Syam maintains an unobtrusive camera yet allows the audience to immerse themselves in the vibrant world of *Maibi* culture. The subtle performances eschew theatricality for a more genuine portrayal that resonates with the essence of the characters and context. What further enriches this cinematic experience is the meticulous integration of traditional Manipuri music into the film's score, a composition skilfully crafted by the director. The soundscape becomes integral to the narrative, breathing life into the cultural backdrop and creating a harmonious blend of sound and image. Syam's dual role as director and composer contributes to the film's authenticity, ensuring that every note resonates with the cultural heartbeat of Manipur. These seemingly unassuming elements elevate the film beyond mere storytelling, transforming it into a convergence of cultural documentation and ethnographic exploration where it transcends the boundaries of conventional narratives. In its contemplative exploration of identity and the ephemeral nature of human relationships, *Ishanou* stands as a rare cinematic gem, inviting audiences into a mystical realm where the boundaries of real and unreal are blurred.

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