

## Chapter – 4

### *Ratan Thiyam*

#### 4.1 Early Life

Borne on January 20, 1948 at Nabadwip West Bengal, Naida District and brought up at Haobam Dewan lane, Impha. He grew up surrounded by art and art-making as was born into a family of artists, his father being most respected gurus of classical Manipuri dance Shri Thiyam Tarunkumar and mother Bilasini Devi a renowned dancer. Apart from being surrounded by art he was also amidst the privations that went with the performative life. A graduate of dramatic Arts from National School of Drama, New Delhi Ratan Thiyam is a multifaceted and versatile artist not only from the view point of theatre, but also from the field of Creative Art. He works as a designer, music composer, choreographer, lightning expert, costume designer, architect and also a playwright, painter and poet.

His boyhood name is Nimai who grew up as a notorious lad doing all sorts of notorious things. At the age of 23 came the most important phase of his literary career as he joined the cultural Forum during 1960s. he started publishing his short stories and poems in a journal called 'Reetu', and hoped to become a great professional writer. He published again his 1<sup>st</sup> noel "*Unnsads Nungsiba*" etc.

## 4.2 Early encounter with theatre

He was known as Ratan kumar till this period, after which he remained dormant for some years and during this he surfaced it again. Later Cumming back to theatre he is popularly known as Ratan Thiyam. Shri B.Jayantkumar Sharma also uttered a few more speeches regarding Ratan's diction used in his poems. His imaginations are quite significant and his poems have the capacity to bind the old and the new.

He was greatly inspired by his father and his mentor Ebrahim Akazi in reaching this elevated status. All the different names indicate the three manifestation of his career in different fields of art.

One of his distinguished attribute is that he can speak very fluently, Urdu, Bengali, Hindi, and English including Manipuri. Many critics have commented about his works. Shri Longjam .Joychandra expressed his views and comments that Ratan Thiyam's published collection of poems revels his deep philosophy on life and about this materialistic world. Shri Joychandra said there is always a note of melancholy and loneliness in his poems. But his use of highly impressive similar, metaphors and rich imagines conveys a lot to the readers.

He is one of the leading figures of the 'theatre of roots' movement in Indian theatre, which started in 1970s. he started chorus Repertory Theatre Company at Imphal with a view the achieve this in 1976 close to a quarter of century later, it still fascinates qudiences with the grace and style of its spectacular canvas.

al *Karushi*, *Chakravyuha*, *Chinglon Mapan*  
*Nungshibi Prithibi* scripted and directed by himself  
and adapted plays – *Khurukshetrangi Pirang*, *Ritu*, *Amamba Yug*, *Uttar*  
*Priyadarshi* expressed his yearning for peace and beautiful life.  
Wahoudok (Prologue) is the first play of Thiyam's Manipur Trilogy —  
*Chinglon Mapan Tampak Ama* (*Nine Hills One Valley*) and *Hey*  
*Nungshibi Prithibi* (*My Earth, My Love*) being the other two.

In the midst of the political chaos in the modern world his works profess a deep concern for social welfare and spiritual yearnings. His plays infuse rationalised and multifaceted analysis of myriad perspectives. His plays are tinged with literary beauty and meaning using ingenious theatrical stagecraft. Most of Ratan Thiyam's plays are thematically Indianised and are profound plays with universal appeal.

His works are strongly influenced by *Natya Sastra*, an Indian theatre style propounded by Bharata during the second century B.C., as also ancient Greek drama, and the Noh theatre of Japan. His approach to theatre has been shaped by years of study under the tutelage of several major exponents of the traditional Manipuri performing arts.

### 4.3 Recognition as Director

Thiyam has created astonishingly contemporary theatre which relies heavily on highly charged visuals, drawing on the rich folk and classical traditions of Manipur. After *Shanarembi*, a poignant tale of the fragility of innocence and its exploitation in an upper class family, Thiyam presented *Uchek Langmeidong* (1978) where the worlds of birds and men are brought together to underscore the cruelty inherent in human relations.

is of battles and warriors, blood fends and  
ou (1980) were a further attempt to expose the  
exploitative tendencies of rules.

The motif of corruption in society transforming into an instrument of religious terror was the theme of *Leima Yenlingai Khuna Kaba*(1980). Amongst his most successful productions are two classics – *Bhāsa's Urubhangam* (1981) and Sophocles' *Antigone* adapted by Thiyam as *Lengshonnei*(1986). In *Antigone* the Greek text is visualized in terms of classical and traditional Indian forms with tribal rituals and symbols. *Chakravyuha*(1984), drawn from the Drona Parva in the *Mahabharata*, is perhaps the most completely realized production where text and structure, theme and form are a seamless whole.

Thiyam is also known for his use of traditional martial arts, of Thang-Ta in his plays, such as in *Urubhangam* (Broken Thigh), of Sanskrit playwright *Bhāsa* itself based on an episode from epic, the *Mahabharata*, which along with *Chakravyuha* is considered one of his finest works. In 1986, he adapted Bertolt Brecht's *Antigone* as *Lengshonnei*, a comment on the personal behavior of politicians, failing to handle political situation in the state. *Uttar Priyadarshi* (The Final Beatitude), an adaptation of Hindi verse play by playwright and poet Agyeya in 1996, based on a story of redemption of King Ashoka, a man's struggle against his own inner dark side and a plea for peace, knowing its impact on future generation. The play has since travelled to many parts of the South Asia, Australia and the US.

known for creating an intense and intimate epochal theme, was famously staged in an open-air performance, at Tonga, Japan, on 5 August 1994, a day before the forty-ninth anniversary of Atomic Holocaust in Hiroshima. His major plays include Ritusamharam: The work seeks solace and sanity amidst chaos and violence of today's world.

All kind of experiments were taking place at Chorus Repertory and for years the process of artistic experiments went on. One cannot fully appreciate Thiyam's theatre without understanding his relationship with his repertory company, and with actor training. He sees theatre as “collective expression”

While talking of the ideal actor, he says: ‘Theatre is a composite art, and actor a vehicle for expression of the thematic content, so the actor must be a composite man..... He need not master all forms of art but he must acquire the basics of aesthetics so that he can utilize the experience as a vehicle of expression in a space called the performance stage”.

Thiyam’s works are tightly choreographed; his actors must physically push the limits of character. "I have always found human expression more convincing when it is physically portrayed, when there is a bodyrhythm". Emphasis on physical stamina and control, as well as on vocal and breath techniques, provides the means to accomplish impressive aural and movement feats.

He is An important functionary of many premier art and cultural institutions of the country, Member of the Society and the Governing Body of the National Science Museum, Kolkata; Departmental Advisory

Education in Arts and Aesthetics of NCERT, New  
Age Foundation, Imphal; Vice-Chairman of the  
Rajiv Gandhi Centre for Culture, Manipur.

#### **4.4 Contribution in Societal Institution**

He has rendered his service for many institute and Govt. Body apart from theatre performances. He has served as a Council Member of Manipur State Kala Akademi, Imphal; Advisor All India Radio, Imphal; Senate Member Manipur University; Member Manipur University Court; Member of the First Court of Nagaland University, Nagaland; Member of the Governing Council, ICCR, New Delhi; Chairman Review Committee North East Zone Cultural Centre, Dimapur; Member of the Programme advisory Committee of All India Radio, Imphal among other post. And formerly, Director National School of Drama, New Delhi; Executive Council Member Sangeet Natak Akademi, New Delhi; Member of the Advisory Board National School of Drama, New Delhi; Member of the Advisory Committee National Handicraft & Handloom Museum, New Delhi; Member of the Tribal Development Committee, New Delhi; Member of the Advisory Committee of the Rangamandal, Bharat Bhavan; Advisor Jawaharlal Nehru Manipur Dance Academy, Imphal; Member of the Academic Council, National School of Drama, New Delhi; Vice Chairman, Jawaharlal Nehru Manipur Dance Academy, Imphal etc.

## 4.5 Awards & Recognition

In recognition to Ratan Thiyam's contribution in the field of theatre he has been adorned with following prestigious awards and titles:

1. *National Academy Award (Sangeet Natak Akademi)*, 1987;
2. *Padmashree*, 1989;
3. *La Grande Medaille*, 1997 (France);
4. *International Man of the Year in the field of Theatre and Humanism*, 1998-99;
5. *SIU-KA-PHA National Award*, 2006 and

Mr.Thiyam has received Fellow & Special invitations from Ford foundation (USA), Manipur State Kala Akademi (Imphal), Japan foundation (Japan), Korean Foundation (Seoul). And he has made his special study tour in USA, UK, Japan, Hong Kong, Greece, Philippines, Thailand, Burma, Indonesia, Yugoslavia, Spain, USSR, France, Australia, and Cambodia.

He has also been participated as Visualizer, Choreographer and presenter in Asian Arts Festival (Hong Kong), Festival of India in UK, Festival of India in USSR, Festival of France in India, and also Artistic Director, Designer, Choreographer in Festival of India in Germany.

Ratan Thiyam with special invitations has been to Italy and New York to teach the theatre students at Orvieto, Italy and Fordham University, New York (USA)

Ratan Thiyam is ranked among the best Directors of the world like Peter Brook, Tadashi Suzuki, Arianne Mnouchkine, Grotowsky, Eugino



1. He is known to be most prominent theatre artist on National and International scene. His productions achieved most prestigious awards including "*Indo-Greek Friendship Award* (Greece), 1984"; "*Fringe Firsts*, 1987 from Edinburgh International theatre Festival"; "*Diploma of Cervantino International theatre Festival*, 1990".

The US Debut Tour in fall 2000 with *UTTAR-PRIYADARSHI* has drawn worldwide attention in bringing peace and non-violence through theatre and received fantastic reviews in the media including LOS ANGELES TIMES, NEW YORK TIMES, WASHINGTON POST, etc.

#### 4.6 Major Productions

1. Karnabharam
2. Imphal – Imphal
3. *Chakravyuha* (Army Formation)
4. Lengshonnei ( An Adaptation of Bertolt Brecht's Antigony)
5. UttarPriyadarshi ( The Final Beatitude by Agyey)
6. Nine Hills One Valley ( Chinglon Napan Tampak Ama)
7. Ritusamharam ( Rutusamharam by Kalidas)
8. Andhayug (The Blind Age by DharmaveerBharti)
9. Wahoudok
10. Ashibagee ( *When We Dead Awaken* – Henrik Ibsen)
11. *When We Dead Awaken* (Ibsen)



## 4.7 Chorus Repertory

Ratan Thiyam's Chorus Repertory Theatre is one of the theatre groups which introduces Manipuri to the rest of the world and thus earned international acclaims with its path breaking plays.

Chorus Repertory Theatre established on April 1, 1976 with more than thirty five years of experience as an institute of international theatre studies and experimentations in national and international levels has been able to occupy its own place as one of the most outstanding organization. Equipped with its most outstanding performances in many international festivals in India and abroad, this repertory has been able to earn the prestigious "Fringe First Award, 1987" from Edinburgh International Theatre Festival, "Indo-Greek Friendship Award, 1984", "Diploma of Cervanting International Theatre Festival, 1990" and had participated in major theatre festival held in different parts of the world.

Thiyam says "Modern man is supposed to know something about everything," "but he has created a world where he is restless and suffers from being surrounded by technology. There has never been any balance with the spiritual and the mind becomes violent."

The members make their own sets, with the hewing and splicing of wood becoming as integral to the performance as the show itself. Hierarchy of juniors and seniors is carefully maintained, with a firm dismissal of any "star image".

The approach adopted by Thiyam for his Chorus Repertory lays great stress on the training process to relate traditional modes of expression to

before using them in his work. The actor must choose an additional form whether it is the Rasa, the Thang-ta, the Moirang Parba or the *Wari Leeba* narrative style of recitation. Actors are rigorously trained and invested in, making it hard for them to leave. They create masks, learn dance and music and theatre, cook their own food and maintain their own kitchen garden ("art is a composite form"), often having to reclaim it from vicious floods that threaten to sweep away the entire structure housing them, which they have only recently been able to afford to build.

"To keep the repertory together, the most important thing is not to pollute human relationships; otherwise people will come and go. We have a meager salary, but even if we have no butter, bread will do," says Thiyaam.

When he started this, he had an idea of running a professional company with productions of high quality. At that time he ran a lot of theatre workshops in different areas of Manipur, and then asked actors to join his repertory.

He started with a handful of very good actors because the selection process was done over two years. By the 1980's they were getting support from Central Indian Govt, but not from the state government. The Central government still helps, but the production costs are getting very high. Since its founding, the company has survived a number of hardships, including several inundating floods that damaged its buildings and land (about 2.75 acres a short distance from the centre of Imphal).

is preserved, and today they enjoy a brand new The Shrine. The design is inspired from the architecture of Southeast Asia specially the house design of tribal of Manipur, Thailand and Myanmar.

He says that: "I think of the stage as a space. That space is where you produce everything. To penetrate that space, you need craftsmanship. You need music, lights, movement. No space should be left unpenetrated." It is for this reason that his performers are trained in dance, acting, martial arts, stagecraft, design and traditional Manipuri forms. He does not single out his theatre as "regional", but asserts, "regional theatre is national theatre".

"People don't realize but theatre is more expensive than filmmaking. Film is a one-time investment. Theatre requires resources for every show." Admitting some frustration at what he terms his unmatched expectations, he asks: "How long will you go on sinking into darkness and longing for a sun ray?" But this is an incongruous strain in his tone and Thiyam soon steadies himself to talk of his spontaneous and deeply felt protests and his dream of leaving behind a legacy of liberty and freedom to future generations.

All these thoughts of his heart portrays his deep concern and attachment towards theatre which is seen in his work also.

#### 4.8 Forms of Manipur used by Thiyam

There are number of traditional narrative forms in Manipur that have been used as teaching exercises for the Chorus actors and are directly and indirectly used in speech patterns. It draws pictures in words, syllables, via variable intonation and enunciation with the aid of gestures. Both the epics are distinctly bound within the Manipur ethos.

For instance, when the *Wari Leeba* narrator describes the Pandava Bhima, he will enumerate the types of food a strong man would eat in Manipur. Let us discuss few major forms of Manipur which created a huge impact on Thiyam's production.

Theatre is a composite art, and the actor only a vehicle for expression, So the actor must be a composite man according to Ratan Thiyam. He must have perfect knowledge of all forms, He need not master all forms of art but he must acquire the basics of aesthetics so that he can utilize the experience as a vehicle of expression in a space called the performance stage.

“An actor may know everything about the forms but still be incapable of expressing. This requires training, a training of the body and mind so that the combination can accelerate either aspect according to the demands of the situation. This is important for any production. A good actor is not enough. She or he must have a sound relationship with the energy levels of the rest of the cast” asserts Ratan.

the *Mahabharata*, the *Natyashastra* and the  
ays under the guidance of Kalacharrrd Shastri to  
understand how to use body and mind to penetrate to text.

Ratan concerned with the inner circle of energy and its external manifestation. The characters projected an inner energy that flowed as rays emanating from the inside to movements beyond the torso, the limbs the face illuminating the space with exotica.

#### **4.9 Thiyaam's Theatre - Rituals and tradition**

His motto in the theatre is "only bread if no butter" says Thiyaam. Thus they have to know how to do everything. The theatre is their religion. Thiyaam also says but I'm not a messiah for all this work. I share my experience of the good and bad things in this so called civilized world, where we are losing our spirit and balance.

According to his as an individual we must get control. He share the kind of power games they play, the way modern man feels in his way of life. Through theatre, he tries to share it with his audience, as if to say, "Let us think together".

During conversation with Kavita Nagpal the focus was on ritual and tradition in theatre and to accusations that Ratan's theatre is exported as exotica' Ratan replies sharply. What is exotica? The exotica' they speak about is external with ornaments, alankara. My exotica are internal. It is exotic energy.

“Rituals and tradition! They are mine Ratan’s

whether do they have any direct bearing to any particular Manipuri tradition nor to the *Natyashastra*. I am creating my own tradition. According to the *Natyashastra* there will be parstavana, a nandi etc. In my prologue, I am using the *Natyashastra* as source of inspiration for creating an impressing of tradition.

People in Manipur say that whatever he do has nothing to do with Manipuri tradition, Sanskrut Pandits criticizing him using the text and application of the *Natyashastra*. Tradition can be enriched by any experience. That is why he say that the artist has to discover his own style through various types of interactions and create his own tradition. And this tradition is not a tradition but a composite reaction to artistic experience. “You must liberate yourself to incorporate Indonesian, Balinese, Japanese, Mexican or any other form that excites to create theatre, create your own theatrical score. Not everyone will respond to the stimulus and certainly not in the same way” says Ratan in a conversation with Kavita Nagpal.

While discussing about the form he says, he don’t utilize any particular form. According to him whatever he creates on stage is not a tradition by itself. Fact is that after breaking the original mould of a traditional form, he utilizes them accordingly to the suitability of a particular situation. Tradition is always a source of inspiration for him. But he tries to do everything keeping in tune with time and space and according to the psychology of modern audience.

director should carry a signature of his own while with which it could be stamped as his creation.

He looks a tradition as a colour which he paints his theatre in his own way. Utilizing tradition by itself is not his tradition, rather utilizing it as a re-interactive tool is his tradition.

He thus is a great artist setting his signature trend and creating his own tradition of theatre through time and space with his great experience, imagination and creativity.

An artist is born to attack the system. For so many years he has been concentrating on war based plays because, given the situation in Manipur, he tries present arguments for peace and solidarity. But at the same time he doesn't care for fancy, intellectual ideologies in his plays because they are not practical with the economics of theatre in Manipur. His plays are not on traditional Manipuri forms alone but he draws his inspirations from many sources. But ethnicity is that original quality inside him. Without which you have no identity. You can't escape it. He is saying that "if I am not different from others, where is my signature?" "he would like to export his theatre to another planet if we talk of exporting theatre to other countries. Once we are on the international circuit, our work must have to be stronger in order to compete. His theatre basically tries to develop a bridge between Eastern and Western theatre. He does come from a small state, but communicate to the world.

He as a director thinks that Theatre is a composite are, and the actor only a vehicles for expression. Thus the actor must be a composite man. There may be a process of playwriting; there may be a process of doing a production or even training of actors, designers. There no way of training



school provided. Whoever is coming to see the play he is interested.

According to him his own experience of the world equips him to see any kind of production. So the experience serves as a kind of training. In his theatre the audience is very important. But prior to it he himself becomes more important than the audience. According to him if he is not satisfied, then don't think the audience will be able to understand and grasp the play and he will not be able to satisfy them. He himself becomes the audience, so it doesn't matter if others recognize his theatre or not.

#### **4.10 Thiyam as playwright and director**

Ratan is acutely conscious of his twin roles as playwright and director, when he directs his own plays. A playwright basically has his own area of imagination, his own devices to express his ideas in terms of words, in terms of characterization, in terms of entries and exits, in terms of the plot, in terms of development of the characters, and also the analysis of playwright is very different from that of a director. It is not necessary, even if I am writing my own plays, that whatever I imagine as a playwright will come about when I direct it. Because while directing I may feel the urge to do something else....I have a special love for my play. But how to put it across? The moment I become the director, the playwright in me goes away. I think as a director, but I think for the playwright. It is not necessary to have the same kind of thinking as a director and playwright. A director's thinking is very different from a playwright thinking. Otherwise you have no freedom, you would be overshadowed. So I try to find an escape from all these contradictions. I try to make the jobs separate, I try to think separately" says Ratan. He

things are the job of a playwright-how the how the argument is taken forward, characterization. But the duty of the director, I feel, is to enhance the hidden meaning of the spoken word....I consider the literary value, the weight of word, the imagery of words, the word that is strong as an argument , the words which are strong as iron, and the thematic content which is like the thread of a garland. Once the thread is there, you put flower after flowers...But the director has no right to create whatever he likes, stepping out from the playwright's point of view”.

#### **4.11 Ratan Thiyam according to Kavita Nagpal**

Thiyam's Manipur is eternally present in Ratan's dramas, even those based on stories from the *Mahabharata*. his concern for the youth and its continuous betrayal by the older generation is predominant in the depiction of Abhimanyu in *Chakravyuha* (1984) the play that shot Ratan into international limelight. The 15 year –old son of Arjuna trustingly enters the *Chakravyuha* created by Drona. His uncles Yudhishtir and Bhima are aware that he does not know how to get out of the martial configuration, but they provoke his sense of daredevil courage and Abhimanyu succumbs. Does he, as the Epic portrays, die a martyr or is Abimanyu a scapegoat? Ratan is pointing to the political power in Manipur that, to further their own ambition, incite youth to suicidal acts in the name of heroism.

In Ratan's play *Duryodhana* the Kaurva is seen as a contemporary man, a materialist. Says Ratan ‘We live in a materialistic world, so how can any Duryodhan, a man who has fulfilled his duties as king, find the absolute truth (of the Gita ? ) He is systematic, calculating and aware of the course

stems from this concrete reality, He is logical  
critical you are and the more inward looking the  
more you suffer. Duryodhan has to suffer and die.

In *Bhāsa's Urubhangam* and *Karnabharam* too Ratan seeks the voice of Manipur and gives it his own tongue within the reality of alienation, The scene where Kunti 'floats' Karna across the stage to be gathered by Radhe, a memorable moment in Indian theatre, echoes the divide between the 'royal' society of the mainland and the Manipur identity, This estrangement is manifest in the occupation of sacred Meitei land by the Indian Army (Assam Rifles) and the restrictions on visiting the site of the monument of martyrs in the war against the British. The criticism about Ratan's choice of themes is to project style and use traditional performance forms as spectacle is far from his intent. He plucks appropriate form and instruments from his heritage to serve the content and it is the content, theme and concern that is paramount says Kavita Nagpal.

#### **4.11.1 Ratan Thiyam's Unique Style**

For him even with his own text, words are merely the base on which Ratan builds movements. His language goes far beyond the mere conveyance of the meaning of a word. As a part of Ratan's larger design feels that beyond the literal meaning is the denotative quality of the word, its placing in space, the aural tone, the trust given by the actor in relation to physical movement and gesture invests it with a distinctive purpose. Beyond the simple oral effect, there is physical thrust to words, the actor's entire body is involved in creating a meaning for the word he is speaking, or the sentence he is constructing, this physical portrayal is a distinctive feature of Ratan's style. The actor's body moves in internal

the performance text. Ratan works his actors techniques to create a distinctive language of expression for each character.

As Ratan has explained several times and as is evident from the changing theatre language of his plays, the word, "tradition" in its usage as deriving from 'traditional' Manipuri forms does not apply to his usage of formal attributes from folk or classical arts. Whether it is Nat Sankirtan, the processional Lai Haroba, the Thang Ta or martial art, the *Wari Leeba* or the narrative singing style called Pena, when it appears in Ratan's plays it has transformed itself into a Ratan ritual/tradition. The process of appropriation has not been simple. Ratan invited Gurus from different disciplines to work with his actors from the very beginning, and continues to return to them even today to understand the nuances of the actor's relationship to the space to the tradition, as it mutates with the text and content.

The empty space is Ratan's preferred performing arena, his source of energy. This space is constantly in a state of active mobilization of emotions through alternations in design and colour, lights, sound and movement. The concept of moving through alteration in design and colour, lights, sound and movement, The concept of moving through space and time dominates, each and every production of Ratan Thiyam. Costumes and colours of drapery are vitally important as are the properties, both handheld and stage. The actors of the Chorus Rep craft and create their own props thus establishing an intimate relationship and making them invisible parts of the character they are portraying.

electrifying patterns of rhythm, speech, movement, sense of colour, style and drapery in costume, emanating from Ratan's interaction with Manipuri tribal and Meitei culture through a singular appropriation of classical text and folklore had reached its pinnacle in *Chakravyuha* where the actors related to postures and gestures of the *Natyashastra* without imitating them. Whereas *Urubhangam* was sophisticated, *Chakravyuha* was free of any improvisation

Considering the above study regarding the form and style used by Ratan Thiyam in his play and practiced at Chorus Repertory, let us discuss his own style used in his play by reviewing his work which may lead us towards the Thiyam's own traditional style.

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The vigour, intensity, electrifying patterns of rhythm, speech, movement, scenic design, a rare sense of colour, style and drapery in costume, emanating from Ratan's interaction with Manipuri tribal and Meitei culture through a singular appropriation of classical text and folklore had

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#### 4.12 Conclusion

The work of Ratan Thiyam may be describe in short as, Contemporary in thought, technically dashing, with themes featuring universal concerns expressed via a dramatics idioms rooted in tradition, yet creatively and continuously experimental is perhaps as appropriate description of Ratan Thiyam's theatre in brief. In play after play these elements surface skillfully placed in context to time, concern and content. Another distinctive feature is the connection to his social milieu and how it transcends Manipur to include the world.

To understand this we need to give a depth thought in his work, which we discuss in the next chapter by studying his master pieces in detail.