

Acknowledgements

The present work of the thesis has been undertaken with a view to providing a thorough knowledge about the Manipuri women and their roles and activities in the Manipuri society and culture through the application of semiosis from a sociological angle. And in my humble endeavour in undertaking the present work, I have been indebted to a good number of persons to whom I would like to acknowledge my heartfelt thanks and gratitude.

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(Laishram Bharati Singh)

Preface

The small State of Manipur, with her exclusive climate, geographical location and people of Mongoloid origin is unique in many ways which set her apart from her other siblings of the so-called 'seven sisters'. More unique is the social set-up that we find in the Meitei community of the valley of the State. The community is within the paradigm of androgenic society; still the womenfolk maintain a status quo which is unique in its own way throughout the history of the people of this community. This unique status quo is how the womenfolk of the community are in general identified with and it becomes a construct of the society with all its cultural codes at work.

Hence, to make a study to obtain a true interpretation and signification of the concept of Manipuri women within the cultural parameter of the society is the issue behind the whole endeavour of this thesis. A Manipuri woman's distinctive personality as well as her roles and activities in the realm of her family and society are a wide ranging expression of rich and complex cultural signification. Her relentless contribution to the society since time immemorial exudes a vital element of a living culture. It can be all assumed as signs relating to the signified concept of a Manipuri woman. These signs or cultural signifiers can be traced through the labyrinthine social practices, religious ethos and cultural milieu in which the Manipuri women exhibit sincere involvement. My personal interest in this regard drove me to embark upon this mission by cultivating a close rapport with them and sharing their experiences, thoughts, feelings, wisdom and worldview.

My approach to this work is through a holistic cultural study by applying the methodological tool of Semiosis from a purely sociological perspective. The sign theory of Saussure and Peirce, viz. Semiology and Semiotic, came in handy to make this specific type of study possible. Saussure believed that semiology may be considered as a science to study the role of signs in social life. Saussurean theory presented a dyadic model of the sign, i.e., the signifier (physical/material form) and the signified (concept/abstract), and the association of the two constituted the sign. The latter Peircian theory developed a triadic model as its basic sign structure, i.e., the

signifying elements of sign or a sign vehicle, an object and an interpretant. The Peircian 'sign vehicle' can be considered equivalent to the Saussurean 'signifier', the 'object' to the 'signified' and the interpretant to the resultant signification that arises out of the sign/object relation. Semiosis, which is concerned with the producing of signs rather than the signs themselves, involves triadic and cyclic models of relation as Peirce propounded in his theory of signs. The three factors involved are the sign vehicle, the designatum (object) and the interpretant. For the sake of convenience, I have used the Saussurean terms, 'signifier' and 'signified' to indicate 'sign vehicle' and 'designatum' respectively.

For my critical evaluation of the study, the research methodology included, amongst other components, primary data collection to delineate how the study can be processed and projected. I have also resorted to several secondary data sources in order to focus on the application of a critical theory and approach to the study of Manipuri women in my attempt to bring forth a new construal of women in the Manipuri cultural and societal context.

To get a clearer insight into the constitution of the Manipuri community in its entirety, an extensive treatment has been given to the third chapter on its regional ecological features, historical background, polity formation, economic indicator, societal configuration, cultural issues and the rites de passage, wherein lies certain important clues to the understanding of the Manipuri identity and society and their philosophy of life. While portraying the various features, the prevalence of the trends and tradition of the society have been highlighted keeping in mind their relevance to the study in concern.

The fourth chapter tries to present a cohesive view of the personality of Manipuri women from numerous aspects, right from the pre-historic era to the modern age. Their status, roles and activities form a vital component to the study of the specific society in question. The chapter also makes an attempt to bring into focus how their status had undergone several paradigm shifts during the course of the history of Manipur.

I have devoted my fifth chapter to an analysis as to how the concept of semiosis can be employed effectively in the context of Manipuri women, traditional and post-traditional alike. Traditional Manipuri women's distinctive attitudinal traits and the

various roles they assume constitute the society's 'projected image of a woman'. These aspects can be construed as sure marks of identification for them. These marks of identification invariably become signifiers which attain conspicuousness in the culture and tradition of the Manipuri society and indicate to the signified Manipuri women. To study producing of signs relating to its contextual signification within the cultural framework of the Manipuri society is the dimension that I adopted in this chapter. In my observation of the signifiers tracing the signified, I have delved into the cultural codes, such as dress, hairstyle, appearance, etc. as well as their roles and activities in the household and societal sphere as signifiers of identification in the 'process of interpretation' to the related signified concept of the Manipuri women.

As regards post-traditional Manipuri women, in the process of semiosis, I have made an attempt to project their image as signifiers where they become speaking subjects rather than remain as mute subjects subverting the male paradigm set by the androgenic society. This is where the feminist stance is evident in the writings and activities of some selected post-traditional Manipuri women. This aspect has been highlighted in the study as tools to validate the objective and hypothesis.

The present research project seeks to take into account why woman of a particular society differs from that of another society though coexisting at the same time. A Manipuri woman has taken the feminine characteristics of a wife, a mother as well as a daughter aligned these symbols with independence, woman power as well as deified gender roles. Thus Manipuri women, moving through several vicissitudes and upheavals, are coming out successful and also proceeding into the stream of modern life though at a slow pace.

Nowadays, women in caring, in non-violent and peaceful ways are learning to respect themselves, value their own work and evoke, expect and demand that respect from others. Feminism of this kind and context, mingled with the region's very own unique features, truly manifests itself in the myriad roles and activities of the Manipuri women. With such new breed of Manipur women coming up in the eastern horizon, we hope the day will not be far away when the status of Manipuri women will be ameliorated and empowerment is duly ensured and enshrined to them.

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Map of Manipur