

Semiosis of Manipuri Women: A Sociological Study

The main concern of the present study *Semiosis of Manipuri Women: A Sociological Study* is to unravel the facts and figures about Manipuri Women and their roles and activities in the cultural context of the Manipuri society. This is a work of cultural studies with the application of the concept of semiosis from a sociological angle. In the present times, Cultural Studies is a part of sociological studies which involves a holistic approach to an academic field of study gaining much importance and popularity. Cultural Studies employs methodological tools like Semiotics, Cultural Semiosis, Social Semiotic, Semiotic Sociology, etc. which are basically critical and interpretative theories to examine every day culture and practices in a specific society. Its study includes, among other issues, the understanding and interpreting of women's roles in a given society. Since the concept of Semiosis is a type of sociological study, the title of the present piece of work is named so.

The thesis is made up of six chapters:

Chapter 1: Introduction: Concept and Theory
1.1: Semiotics, Semiology, Semiotic, Semiosis
1.2: Cultural Studies and Cultural Semiosis

Chapter 2: Framework of the Study
2.1: Origin and development of the concept
2.2: Statement of the problem
2.3: Review of Literature
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4.3: Manipuri Women in modern era

Chapter 5: Semiosis and Manipuri Women

Chapter 6: Summary, Conclusion and Findings

Chapter 1

This introductory chapter concentrates on understanding the concepts and theories of Semiotics and Cultural Studies, and relevant operational terms. Semiotics or Semiotic Studies is an umbrella term concerning the science of signs. The study of signs is not a modern conceptual development. In ancient times too, philosophers would ponder over the role of signs in nature and human experiences. John Locke (1632-1704) became a name to be directly associated with this study of signs. He first coined the term ‘semiotics’ from the Greek word ‘semeiotike’ meaning ‘the doctrine of signs’ in English in his historic work, *An Essay concerning “Human Understanding” of 1690*. The term ‘Semiotics’ stuck to its meaning thereof where many other later philosophers added to its conceptual development till Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1919), a Swiss linguist and Charles Sanders Peirce (1832-1914), an American philosopher came to the picture in the first part of the 20th century to further define it in their own respective terms.

Ferdinand de Saussure, the father of Modern Linguistics, coined the term ‘Semiology’ from the Greek ‘semeion’(sign), to indicate Semiotic Studies of Language in his *Course in General Linguistics(1916)*. He insisted that Semiology maybe envisaged as a science to study the role of signs in social life. Saussure offered a dyadic or a two-part model of the sign – a signifier (*significant*) and the signified (*signifie*). The signifier and the signified exist in relation to each other. A sign makes sense only in relation to other signs. He claims that no word carries any meaning inside. It is a ‘signifier’ a representation of some object, the ‘signified’ or the object, to be conceived in the mind, in order to constitute a meaningful sign. Once a sign is established in the linguistic community and develops a historical existence, it cannot be changed any more. When it is used socially within a codified system, it earns a connotation which gets inclusion in the culture of sign-users.

Charles Sanders Peirce, an American philosopher, who founded Philosophical Pragmatism, used the term 'Semiotic' to develop his Sign theory in the 1860s. It was closely related to Logic as the medium of enquiry and the process of scientific discovery. He offered a triadic or a three-part model as his basic sign structure i.e. the signifying elements of signs or the sign vehicle, the object and the interpretant. The 'sign', as Peirce used, can be considered as the signifier, for example, 'smoke'; the object as the signified, e.g. 'fire' signified by 'smoke' and the interpretant as the signification that arises out of the sign/object relation. Peirce's Sign Theory of 1867-68 is generally regarded as his early initial stage. In this early account, he also classified three types of signs, namely, *icon*, *index* and *symbol*.

Semiosis is a term initially used by Charles Sanders Peirce. The term has been coined from the Greek word 'semeiosis' which is derived from the verb 'semeio' which means 'to mark'. Peirce as well as Saussure realized that the form of speech and writing alone was inadequate in producing significant interpretation of the language sign systems. Therefore, semiosis has been developed to initiate a relational study between language and other human and non-human sign systems. It connotes any form of activity, conduct, or process that involve signs including the production and communication of meaning by establishing relationships between signs which are to be interpreted by an audience.

Generally speaking, it is a sign process. It is observed that its concern lies in the producing of signs rather than the signs themselves. Semiosis involves triadic and cyclic models of relations as Peirce had done in explaining his Sign Theory or Semiotic. The three factors involved are the sign vehicle, the designatum and the interpretant; the interpreter maybe considered as a fourth factor. Cultural Studies is an academic field of studies which embodies a holistic approach that has gained importance and popularity worldwide in recent years. Cultural studies combines various theories and studies such as feminist, social and political theory, history, philosophy, literary, media and communication, art, etc. to examine cultural phenomena in various societies. It aims to decipher the manner how meaning is created and delivered through various practices, beliefs, and social, political, economic structures within a given culture.

Nowadays, Semiotics or Cultural Semiotics is a major approach to the study of culture as a signifying system constituted by signifying practices. It is a science which employs

standardised methodological tools to understand the production, organisation and transformation of meaning through the use of signs. It is also considered as a critical method, originating from literary analysis to assess the everyday cultural practices and beliefs. Cultural Semiotics became popular with the publication of *Mythologies* (1957) by Roland Barthes. Cultural Studies also adopts semiosis or cultural semiosis as an important and influential tool in tracing the cultural signs and signifiers embedded in cultural practices and beliefs, and in social, political and economic structure of society. This approach is heavily indebted to the notion of *unlimited semiosis* propounded by Umberto Eco and Carlo Sini. Both of them relied on Charles Sanders Peirce and his triadic model of semiosis.

This chapter is a systematic exercise to elucidate the various theories and concepts applicable to the present piece of research work. It has made an attempt to define and illustrate the different approaches and methodological tools employed, in a way which is appropriate and easily comprehended. The relevant operational terms are incorporated wherever necessary. This chapter will enable to provide an idea of applying a critical theory and approach to the study of Manipuri women, presenting a new interpretation of women in the context of Manipuri culture and society.

Chapter 2

The next chapter deals with the main components of the study, that is, the framework, the statement of the problem, scope and universe of the study, objective and hypothesis and the methodology employed to delineate how the study can be processed and projected.

This chapter tries to present a culturally specific picture of a Manipuri woman. She is an embodiment of some determining aspects of nature and being that truly distinguishes her as a separate entity in the very structure of the Manipuri society. Her female identity, her appearance, her conduct and manner, her role and activities in family and societal sphere can be assumed as sign-vehicles that convey a social meaning. These signs are culturally organised into sign systems that are subject to historical modes of sign production. In short, she is a producer of signs, a sender of messages, more than her male counterpart, influencing a significant resultant representation of the cultural ethos of the Manipuri society. Thus these cultural signs and signifiers of the Manipuri women which are woven in the very fabric of the cultural practices of the Manipuri society can be effectively

studied and investigated critically and theoretically. The main research question of the study is – **Can we not aptly use the tool semiosis to study and investigate the producing of cultural signs and signifiers that relate to the signified women in Manipuri society?**

The review of literature represents books and journals which have been consulted relating to the chapters designed for the study.

This chapter also tries to elucidate how the theories can be put to application to analyse women and their cultural attributes in a given culture and society. The research work may set to initiate an interpretation and signification of the activities of Manipuri women and an understanding of their true identity in the context of the Manipuri societal setup.

Universe of the Study

The study concentrates on the activities of the Manipuri women living in the State of Manipur. Though large concentrations of the Manipuris dwell in the States of Assam, Tripura and other neighbouring areas, and even in the countries of Bangladesh and Myanmar, the selection of the State of Manipur is mainly because of its representative aspect of mainstream culture and tradition of Manipuri society. Out of the nine districts of Manipur, four districts where the Manipuri concentration is maximum are selected as the delimitation of the study. The study also seeks to confine to activities of the Manipuri or Meitei women in particular of the society. To investigate the cultural signifiers at the traditional level, the rural Manipur will be the perfect as the rural women still maintain their age-old customary traditions and cultural practices. While to focus on the image of the ‘new woman’ at the modern level, the best area is the urban Manipur where we find the maximum of the educated, employed and emancipated lot of the Manipuri women.

Objective of the Study

1. To study semiosis or the process of sign production of the Manipuri women in societal, economic, political, cultural and literary framework of the Manipuri society.
2. To trace the signifiers both at initial traditional level as well as at secondary modern level of signifiers.

3. To investigate problems of signification arising out of clash of the two- level signifiers.

Hypothesis of the Study

1. Semiosis of the Manipuri women can be approached from the works of the Manipuri women within social codes and framework as signifiers.
2. Semiosis of the Manipuri women is an interpolation of the two signifiers at traditional and modern levels.
3. The secondary level of signifiers is what the Manipuri ‘new’ women are.

Method of data collection

The research work is based on descriptive, qualitative and explorative type. It is depended on both primary and secondary data collection. For secondary data, census and books, journals and periodicals have been consulted upon. A systematic study of cultural practices and societal, economic and political aspects of the Manipuri society constitutes an appropriate background foundation before approaching the Manipuri women directly for primary data. Interview schedules, unstructured interviews, interview guides, participant observation and diary from field are some of the research methods that have been employed to have an in-depth knowledge about the social structure, economy, politics and cultural, traditional and customary features of the society.

Chapter 3

To comprehend the ins and outs of the Manipuri society, one needs to gather a complete knowledge of the regional topographical features of the State of Manipur, her historical background and political structure which are the essential characteristics that constitute the distinctive framework of a particular society. Moreover, her societal configuration from families, clans to kinships, and her economic indicators present a picture of the development process the region has undergone in course of time. What also cannot be ruled out are the cultural issues which are vital factors that have become so attached to the people of the region that these issues act as a source of existence and survival for the society as a whole. This chapter provides an appraisal of all these features for a general insight into all these aspects of the region and its people. In doing so, it makes an attempt

to relate and throw light on other fields of study that are coming up in later parts of the research work.

Chapter 4

Understanding a society from a holistic perspective necessitates the understanding of the ‘other’ half or the often neglected half of the society, i.e. women. Their role and contribution towards various walks of life is of utmost importance to the study of the given society. Their status in the society can be construed as a pointer to a nation’s development index. Over and above, the social outlook and treatment meted out towards them accentuates their condition and place in life and society. Viewed from these angles, we perceive that almost in all the societies of India which are androgenic in nature, women are cornered in every sphere of life. The status of women in India, in general, is still far from being a rosy picture even in recent times. Compared to this demoralising scenario, the status of women in Manipuri society seems to be far better from different angles, if not the best. This better feature maybe solely because of some innate qualities, traits and aptitudes which are inherent in the Manipuri women that have compelled the society to respect and support them in their various roles and activities of life. This chapter will concentrate on the study of Manipuri women from numerous aspects, right from the pre-historic era through the medieval period to the modern age. It will try to highlight how their status had several paradigm shifts during the course of Manipur’s history.

Manipuri Women in ancient period

Mention of the capabilities and calibres of Manipuri women has been so often alluded to in oral tradition and literature as well as in ancient texts like the *Cheitharol Kumbaba*, the Court Chronicle of the Kings of Manipur [Original text, translation and notes, Vol.1, 33-1763CE, Saroj Nalini Arambam Parratt, Routledge, 2012]. The Court Chronicle, which is one the most important authenticated sources of history of Manipur, testifies to the fact that ‘*Chakpas*’ (pre-Meiteis), the indigenous inhabitants of the region before the advent of the *Porei* group or the *Pakhangba* group, had *Yumkhei Ngakpi*, women defenders of the kingdom who guarded and protected the palace and the people as well [1324CE, pg.35]. Hence it is often supposed that the region must have had a matriarchal system in pre-historic times. This unit concentrates on the allusions of Manipuri women in myths,

legends, and also about various facets of the women of the royal household and the common society.

Manipuri Women in medieval period

The Medieval period in the history of Manipur had seen a lot of political upheavals and social unrest which directly or indirectly affected the kingdom in myriad matters of importance. Some of the root causes were the influence of the introduction of a new religion, that is, the advent of Hinduism which brought about frictions with the existing old faith, the frequent attacks and invasions from its neighbouring kingdoms, especially from Awa (Burma) which completely devastated the kingdom for a number of years and finally, the internal conflicts among the royal household for the accession to the throne and the British intervention from early 1820's onwards which culminated with its takeover of the kingdom in 1891CE.

During this period, women were the worst sufferers. They had to maintain family and their market economic needs as well as practice the new faith with different rites and rituals. When the Awa forces completely ruined Manipur, land, people, agriculture, cottage industries and all, normally termed as the *Seven Years Devastation* of Manipur, the kingdom was almost wiped out of its male population. Women outnumbered men during those times. Their responsibilities, burdens, liabilities became many-fold. Survival in all respects depended solely on their shoulders. Reconstruction of the society, rebuilding of lives, struggles for existence and security hardened them and made them strong enough to fight against all odds. Manipuri women did not shrink from hardships. Farming which needed male involvement in digging and ploughing, cottage industries and market economy were all restarted and maintained by them. Their ability to cope with such burdens had made them industrious and self-reliant. Chivalry became almost non-existent in Manipur.

Manipuri women in modern era

The real portraiture of the Meitei women is best manifested in the Modern period of the history of Manipur. Reeling under the hegemonic dominance of patriarchy as well as British imperialism coupled with a weak and autocratic King as a nominal head by the turn of the 19th century, one would have thought they were the most subjugated and marginalised sufferers of that transitional period of the Victorian era. Contrary to that,

these women came out in the open and displaying their mettle, reciprocated with their fights against injustice and oppression, not solely for their lot just as the feminist wave of the western world swept in the European soil, but for the society and community as a whole. What is most striking was the sheer selfless dedication they had for the protection of the people from atrocities and domination when the men of Manipur failed to become a potent force to reckon with. They formed one dynamic structural phenomenon that would never bother for their comforts but rather work and think in groups even to this day. Although, it sounds like a flow against the post-modern current trend of individualism, yet, the spirited struggles of subversion by these women cannot be ruled out as devoid of the very ethos of post-modernism. Recurrent deploring situations had compelled them to bond together. Their strong sense of cohesive consciousness and activities have led to such stupendous outcomes that the world would covet for. They are also best remembered and glorified for their efforts and actions in groups.

In this chapter, how the status of these women has undergone changes in different stages of history and their problems arising out of it have been incorporated. We also capture a fairly better picture and notion of the type of society the Manipuri society is and the outlook it focuses from the nuances described about its women in the course of Manipuri history. We can safely conclude that the Manipuri women are the self-appointed custodians of the society.

Feminism of modern times, is connected with non-violent co-operation and has a potential for peace-making where its manifestation can be noticed in its attempts to facilitate participatory human relations rather than control them, and its insistence on making the personal political and vice versa. It also implies reconciliation rather than victory. Feminism of this manner, has set in a process by which women in caring, non-violent and peaceful ways are learning to respect themselves, value their own work and to evoke, expect and demand that respect from others. Feminism of this contextual background, coupled with the land's very own social, economic, political and cultural uniqueness, make its manifestation, 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 better and empowerment is enshrined to them.

Chapter 5

This chapter concentrates on the process of creation of signs and finding the contextual signification within the cultural framework of the Manipuri society for the women signified. This present chapter tries to focus on the objectives this particular research study will aim at to fulfil and also try to find the validity of the hypothesis. It also provides a look into the research question whether semiosis is a relevant tool to study the cultural signifiers that can be interpreted to the signified Manipuri women is of utmost necessity to further solidify that conviction of the major purpose of the research study.

One of the units of the chapter focuses on the signifier tracing the signified through the cultural codes as marks of identification of the Manipuri women.

Every society has its own ‘projected image of the woman’ in the society’. ‘This projected image of the woman’ in the society is the construct of the very society and as such, in the process, considered semiotically, women living in that society are the constitution of varied signifiers which help in projecting the image.

The extraneous elements such as dress, hair-style, appearance, etc. can be the signs leading to the confirmation of identity of the Manipuri woman. It is with this end in view, a study has been made of these signs in detail and of how they are relevant in the identification of Manipuri women as per the cultural code of Manipuri society. It is semiosis on the ground that it is a method employed as “a process of interpretation” as an essential interest of the semiotician/ semiologist. Further, as signs are equivalent to signifiers, which lead to the objects, these extraneous elements are also signifiers for the interpretation of the object “Manipuri Woman”.

Another unit of this chapter focuses on the signifier tracing the signified through the roles and activities as signifiers of interpretation of the Manipuri women. Their roles and activities towards their family and society can be socially considered as signifiers of signs which convey social meanings and interpretations. Thus a Manipuri woman represents a producer of such signs where the interpretation and signification is manifested in the societal, economic, political and cultural context of the society. To have a full knowledge of these signs, we have signifiers that relate to them culturally at the traditional as well as the post-traditional level, and the meanings generated thereon.

The roles of a Manipuri woman, such as cooking, social works, etc. are signifiers because in all these roles, the sign appears. We can also regard the body of a woman which indicates 'womanliness' as a sign. Then it follows that dress, hair style, etc., are all symbolic as well as indexical signs attached to womanliness which become signifiers further when they are used to a woman of a particular social group with its social codes of culture and ethnicity attached to it. The symbolic and the indexical signs evoke a sense of the iconic sign mentally of the Manipuri woman naturally (of a particular).

The chapter also focuses on the post-traditional Manipuri women as signifiers subverting the paradigm as speaking subject. In fine, in the process of semiosis, an attempt has been made to project the image of the Manipuri woman as signifiers where she is no more a mute subject but becomes a speaking subject thereby subverting the paradigm set by the patrilocal society. This is what the feminist stance is evident in the efforts of the post-traditional Manipuri woman. This has been explained with the help of the works of a few select Manipuri activists and writers incorporated in the present research work as tools to justify the objective and hypothesis.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This chapter includes a brief summary of the above five chapters along arriving at a conclusion along with the findings of the whole study.

In the semiotic process, we make an inquiry with the help of sign (signifier/sign vehicle) to know the object. For this, we are engaged in the process of sign interpretation by what Peirce calls "some informationally incomplete facsimile of the dynamic object generated at some interim stage in a chain of signs" (immediate object). And then, we reach at "the goal and the end point that drives the semiotic process" (dynamic object). To put in other words, to verify the semiotic process, we have to be engaged in a two-pronged endeavour – (i) employment of semiosis and (ii) the process of inquiry. This is why we have first traced the signifiers that are related to the signification of Manipuri women and then driving home the cultural relation that the signifiers have with the object in question – Manipuri women – through various interview schedules, unstructured interviews, interview guides, participant observation and diary from field-work employed as a part of empirical study. The present work, therefore, brings into focus some facts in the form of findings that semiosis can be safely employed as a reliable tool for a case study as social semiotics (relating to social meaning making processes):

Findings

The findings thus derived are highlighted as follows:

1. Manipuri women since time immemorial have been playing indispensable roles in all the societal, economic, political and cultural spheres of the Manipuri community.
2. Manipuri society, though, patrilocal in its social structure is always the summation of the roles and activities of the Manipuri women.
3. So to know the Manipuri society thoroughly, a consideration of the Manipuri women and their roles and activities in the society is a must and always comes to the forefront.
4. Since semiotics is closely associated with sociology in the evaluation of the everyday life of a community in a social set-up, the case of the Manipuri women and their roles and activities can also be studied semiotically.
5. As semiosis is a part of semiotics which is concerned with the production of signs and sign-activities, it can be safely employed as a useful tool in evaluating the roles and activities of the Manipuri women as signifiers for the production of different signifieds associated with different signs of Manipuri women in the process of signification.
6. Semiosis being a cultural study having sociological paradigms, empirical studies undertaken with interviews schedules, unstructured interviews, interview guides, participant observation and diary from field-work are feasible to prove the validity of the methodology adopted.

Tables

Table no. I: Literacy Rate – Census 2001 and 2011

Census	2001			2011		
	Persons	Males	Females	Persons	Males	Females
Total Literacy	1,310,534	753,466	557,068	1,908,476	1,039,858	868,618
Literacy %	66.61	77.71	57.29	76.94	83.58	70.26

[Courtesy: Manipur Population Census data 2011. Accessed on 23/01/2016]

Table no. II: Phanek as signifiers for the signified concept of Manipuri women

Description	Old (married) Age (51-75)			Young (unmarried/married) Age (20-35)/(36-50)			Total		
	Phanek	Saree	Others	Phanek	Saree	Others	Phanek	Saree	Others
Rural	75	--	--	75	--	--	150	--	--
Urban	75	05	02	75	09	33	150	14	35
Total	150	05	02	150	09	33	300	14	35

Table no. III: Mode of wearing *phanek* around the waist

Age Area	Old (married) Age (51-75)				Young (unmarried/married) Age (20-35)/(36-50)				Total			
	Yes	%	No	%	Yes	%	No	%	Yes	%	No	%
Rural	06	8	69	92	75	100	-	-	81	54	69	46
Urban	57	76	18	24	75	100	-	-	132	88	18	12
Total	63	42	87	58	150	150	-	-	213	71	87	29

Table no.IV: Choice of dressing hair in a bun

Age Area	Old (married) Age (51-75)				Young (unmarried/married) Age (20-35)/(36-50)				Total			
	Yes	%	No	%	Yes	%	No	%	Yes	%	No	%
Rural	72	96	03	4	56	75	19	25	128	85	22	15
Urban	65	87	10	13	16	21	59	79	81	54	69	46
Total	137	91	13	9	72	48	78	52	209	70	91	30

Table no.V: Choice of joining *marup*

Age Area	Old (married) Age (51-75)				Young (unmarried/married) Age (20-35)/(36-50)				Total			
	Yes	%	No	%	Yes	%	No	%	Yes	%	No	%
Rural	46	61	29	39	69	92	06	08	115	77	35	23
Urban	41	55	34	45	62	83	13	17	103	69	47	31
Total	87	58	63	42	131	87	19	13	218	73	82	27