

## **CHAPTER V**

# **Semiosis and Manipuri Women**

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In the last chapter, we concentrated on various personalities of Manipuri women which are worth looking into and bringing into focus from the very early part of history to modern era. In a holistic perspective, we are made to acquaint with their attitudinal traits and innate attributes that go in the making of true Manipuri women as unique entities. Their distinctive nature, manner and various roles they assume effectively become sure marks of identification for them. These sure marks of identification thus become signifiers which can be found in the tradition and culture of Manipuri society and are related to the signified Manipuri women. Process of creation of signs and finding contextual signification within cultural framework of Manipuri society for the women signified is the main purpose of the study.

This present chapter will try to focus on objectives this particular research study will aim at to fulfil and also try to find validity of hypotheses. A look into the research question whether semiosis is a relevant tool to study 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 research study.

#### **Signifier tracing signified: Cultural codes of identification of Manipuri women**

Understanding of a thing and for that matter anything, is composed exclusively of signs and as such there is always a distinction between real thing (universe as it really is, independent of mind) and thing known to our cognition. Cognitive universe therefore is formed of signs because it is universe already turned into words. Whatever we know, therefore, we know as a sign; we know it to be significant and thus communicable. Semiotics has as its realm the system of signification. It is a stipulation of semiotics that whatever does not function within a communicative system cannot be a sign; that there can be no truly 'private' signs. That is why a sign must be conventional in order to qualify as a sign.

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

Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress’s ‘*Social Semiotics*’ focused on use of semiotic system in social practice. They explain that social power of texts in society depends on interpretation: “Each producer of a message relies on its recipients for it to function as intended”.<sup>1</sup> This process of interpretation situates individual texts within discourses, the exchanges of interpretative communities. The work of interpretation can contest the power of hegemonic discourses.

From this angle of Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress, we can make a study of the Manipuri social practices in which women are identified against the backdrop of their male counterparts. These social practices for identification are “process of interpretation” (semiosis) which we are going to discuss in this chapter as codes of social norms:

If signs are the means with which we can make inference for their signifieds with the help of interpretations, then 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, we will make a study of these signs in detail and of how they are relevant in the identification of Manipuri women as per the cultural code of the 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 objects, these extraneous elements are also signifiers for interpretation of the object “Manipuri Woman”.

### **Dress code and Manipuri women**

A woman’s ethnic costume is unique to that particular tribe or community to which she belongs. It becomes the mark of identification of that community or tribe. A ‘*phanek*’ worn by a Manipuri woman will be a sign of being a Manipuri woman for those with a small amount of cultural knowledge or powers of interpretation required to read it in the context of Manipuri society. Hence traditional costume of Manipuri

women is '*phanek*' (a sarong-type wrap around) and '*innaphi*' (indigenous shawl or stole draped around shoulders) combination which is the mark of identification of her ethnicity and community as far as she wears it with the cultural signification attached to it. Use of *phanek* on different occasions has become a myth on the ground that it becomes infinitely suggestive, invested with meaning and eventually, opened to appropriation by society with a social usage which is added to pure substance. *Phanek*, therefore, represents a certain evaluation of dress for women in Manipuri society. It earns a connotative sign-system in which the expression plane is a sign-system.

Tables are framed on response of 300 respondents to interview schedule, interview, participant observation, case study etc. Total number of respondents along with their percentage is provided wherever necessary. The following table below will show *phanek* as signifiers for the signified concept of Manipuri women.

**Table no. V.I: *Phanek* as signifiers for the signified concept of Manipuri women**

Classification	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

From the table, we come to know how *phanek* rather than any other costume plays a vital role as a cultural signifier. All respondents wear *phanek* though some urban women wear other attires occasionally.

#### **Mode of wearing the traditional costume**

How a Manipuri woman dons her *phanek* is a matter to be dealt with as it is indicative of whether she is married or unmarried. An unmarried young girl would wear it wrapped around her waist and tuck in on the left side; whereas a married woman would lift the upper edge *phanek* over the chest and tuck in under her left arm. An unmarried woman would wear a blouse on top of her *phanek* with the *innaphi* draped around the shoulders with its right edge lifted over the left shoulder. Though married

woman wears *innaphi* in more or less the similar way, she may or may not wear a blouse. So, from the mode of wearing traditional costume, one can easily identify the marital status of a Manipuri woman, be it in ancient times or modern, or by a royal or a common woman. The society has set this mode and it became an accepted code to interpret signification in cultural context. Therefore, dress code and its mode of wearing are as important as marks of identification of a Manipuri woman which are embedded in socio-cultural tradition of Manipuri society.

In more recent times, married women also follow the style of young girls and wear their *phanek* round their waists. Wearing it from their chests is usually confined to their homes. The following table will highlight recent trend in mode of wearing *phanek* prevalent among young and old.

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

Classification	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

From the table, it is evident that most women, young and old, especially in urban area prefer to wear *phanek* around their waist.

Also, mode of draping *innaphi* has seen changes for the sake of convenience and easy movement. It is clad like a half *saree* with one end tucked on left side of the waist and other end (*pallu*) thrown over the left shoulder. Most Manipuri women, except those who are aged, wear the costume in such manner. This modified version of wearing also has become to be a cultural sign to indicate Manipuri woman.

In spite of that, when these married women participate in public domain of some social occasions relating to cultural importance like weddings and death ceremonies, they wear *phanek* and *innaphi* in traditional style to retain the very cultural code of signification of a married Manipuri woman.

**Daily wear**

Generally, Manipuri women wear traditional/ethnic attire in varieties of colours, designs, patterns and textures. But it is invariably worn on different occasions. Occasions define which sort of colour, pattern and texture of attire to be worn. Manipuri women maintain a certain kind of uniformity on any social occasion pertaining to clothes they wear which makes that particular attire with its colour, design and texture a cultural sign. Manipuri women maintain these cultural codes strictly on special occasions till this day.

Plain *phanek* of varying colours with or without the unique temple motif are worn on a daily basis. *Innaphi* is normally woven of cotton or fine silk yarn. Manipuri women exhibit their proficiency in weaving innovating patterns on *innaphi*. *Innaphi* are of various colours and textures. In spite of that Manipuri women adhere to white colour prominently for its cultural significance.

***Ureirong pungou phanek* for solemn occasions**

There are certain occasions on which a particular type of plain *phanek* is worn – peach/pink coloured one which is otherwise called ‘*ureirong pungou phanek*’ in Manipuri. It is usually paired with a white plain designed *innaphi*. Plain peach/pink *phanek* with white plain *innaphi* combination is worn on religious occasions of both Meiteism and Hinduism rituals as well as in mournful occasions like funeral and death ceremonies. Use of such attire for religious purposes and in sombre events by Manipuri women, young and old, connotes a symbol of purity, serenity and sombreness. It is also the apparel of widowed women as mourning attire which automatically becomes the signifying element of their bereaved status. Women who participate in or visit a funeral rite or a death ceremony wear the same attire to show their solidarity to the grieving family at their moment of extreme sadness and bereavement. This type of *phanek-innaphi* combination becomes a sign to signify identity of a widow or a woman participating in religious social occasions. Thus, proper usage of dress code for solemn occasions can be interpreted as signification of the same for the object Manipuri women which have not seen any changes till date.

**Formal wear for grand occasions: *Mayeknaiba lei phanek* and *Moirang innaphi***

Manipuri women wear a different type of *phanek* and *innaphi* for outdoor purposes and for formal social gatherings like weddings, wedding feast and similar other grand occasions. This type of *phanek* is woven in traditional loom with silk or other finer threads of two or three coloured stripes. Upper and lower borders of *phanek* are embroidered with intricate traditional or trendy motifs. The '*khoi*' *mayek* or pattern which was introduced in 969 CE<sup>2</sup> especially for ladies of royal household and other high-end families in ancient period retained its popularity and ethnicity till date. Manipuri are able to dye their clothes with colours of their choice produced by an indigenous process from ancient times – light pink or '*lei*' (flower) colour being their favourite hue. Hence light pink and black striped *mayeknaiba phanek* are most widely worn and adorned by Manipuri women on special occasions like weddings and other related occasions. It is teamed with a flimsy white cotton or silk '*moirang*' *innaphi* woven with beautiful designs, traditional or trendy, that exhibit exquisite taste and texture. This type of *phanek-innaphi* combination qualifies as a cultural sign for formal dress code of married Manipuri women in the context of customs and cultural of Manipuri society.

Further, young unmarried girls wear *mayeknaiba phanek* and *moirang innaphi* in various colour co-ordinations for such grand occasions. They are not restricted to wear any fixed colour combination like married women. Nevertheless, formal dress code for participating in any formal social gathering is, invariably, Manipuri ethnic wear of *mayeknaiba phanek* and *moirang innaphi* which is strictly practised even today. So this dress code can be defined as the identifying sign of a Manipuri woman in cultural context.

Nowadays, *mayeknaiba phanek* and *moirang innaphi* are available in all possible colours and textures which are worn by Manipuri women when they step out of doors for formal occasions. The *phanek*'s unique striped pattern and the *innaphi*'s temple motif border are ever-retained which distinguishes combination from other similar costumes as the only unique costume of Manipuri women. It has not lost its cultural connotation as typical ethnic costume of Manipuri women.

***Phigeh phanek and muga innaphi***

This *phigeh phanek* is of a relatively heavier material made of *muga* (silk) with normally crimson/magenta and black stripes. *Innaphi* is of pure *muga* in its original raw, silk colour. Silk is considered to be a pure and sanctified material/ thread and it is the preferred clothing for feasts. Therefore, *phigeh phanek* and *muga innaphi* pair is considered rare and special and hence, worn on very special occasions such as *Chakouba* (wedding feasts), *Ningol chakouba* (feast dedicated to daughters and sisters in their parental homes) and similar other grand feasts. Because of its rich texture, colour and fine quality, this *phanek-innaphi* pair is also expensive and so, its usage is limited to only those above mentioned occasions. Hence, such kind of dress code also becomes a cultural signifier by its being interpreted as the sanctified attire to the signified usage of it by Manipuri women.

**Bridal dress**

Manipuri bridal dress is unique in its form and thus special in every possible way. It is almost the same costume that Radha and Gopis wear in a Ras Leela with all splendour and finery. It consists of a huge cylindrical skirt (*potloi*) which covers till ankles and girdled round the waist. The velvet blouse is covered with gold embellishments. A lot of gold ornaments are decked on. Head dress is a beautiful circular tiara called *kajenglei*, and flimsy veil covers her back and shoulders. Thus, the bridal dress is indeed a beautiful sight to be beheld. This bridal wear has become a mark of identification signifying Manipuri bride on her very special wedding day.

**Dress code of *Maibi***

Maibi who are the priestess belonging to Meiteism or old Meitei faith also follow a certain dress code which is different from any other costume. A Maibi wears a plain *phanek*, a full-sleeved blouse, a *khwangjet* (waist band) and a plain *innaphi*, all in spotless white. The whole costume is the symbolic apparel and colour identification of a *Maibi*. Hence, the colour white in the above costume becomes a symbol of purity and sanctity, indicative of role and status of a priestess, to signify identity of a Maibi. She wears this costume as daily attire as well as in *Lai Haraoba* festival where she performs Meitei customary rites, dances and sings and also falls into a trance and



predicts future. We can compare her white apparel to the white apparel worn by a Christian Catholic nun as a sign of sanctity in the culture of Manipuri society.

### Hair dressing style of Manipuri women

Manipuri women also differentiate among themselves between married and unmarried by the way they dress their hair. Manipuri women have straight long dark hair that flow like a cascade down her back. They used to cleanse and condition their hair with an indigenous shampoo of *cheng-hi* (water drained from cleaning rice) mixed with several aromatic leaves and herbs.

As a young maiden, a Manipuri woman would keep her front hair in a fringe, rounded at the edge near the sides of the forehead and extended by the sides of her face till her jaw line. Her back hair is kept long, straight and open. As soon as she gets married, she no longer keeps her hair open but ties it into a bun at the back of her head. Thus, a Manipuri woman's mode of hair-dressing also qualifies as a sign to interpret her marital status in socio- cultural context of the society.

In recent times, some young Manipuri girls and even married women keep their hair short according to the latest hair-style common among other women. Below is a table showing the number of respondents who prefer dressing their hair in a bun to keeping it short.

**Table no.V: III: Choice of dressing hair in a bun**

Area \ Age	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

From the table, we come to know that dressing the hair in a bun is more of a habit and choice among the rural and old women rather than among the urban and young women. But maintaining the hair long and straight is still most preferred by both young and old.

## Ornament

As ornaments adorn a woman, they are her first love. Manipuri women wear gold ornaments and are very fond of them. Their favourite pieces of jewellery are necklaces, earrings, bangles and finger rings. They are also fond of wearing arm bands called '*pambomjai*'. From ancient times, there are some traditional designs in gold jewellery unique to the culture of the land. Some necklace designs like '*liklu*', '*likshoi*', '*heigrushaba pareng*', '*marei pareng*', '*bokul pareng*', '*sandrembi pareng*', '*kyang-lik-phang*', etc., earring designs like '*naying*', '*nathang*', '*jinjur*', etc., bangles like '*mari phangbi*' and finger rings like '*lairen makoi*' are adorned by normally married women and the aged. Designs are unique in itself and akin to Manipuri culture and tradition. Such indigenous ornaments can be interpreted as a sign and signification of Manipuri women's exquisite taste and choice. Though trendy designs in ornaments are worn nowadays, ethnic jewellery has not lost its lustre and appeal. Such ethnic jewellery is still much desired and is on high demand.

## Name and identity

Identity of a Manipuri woman is very much foregrounded in her name itself. Name automatically discloses her identity as an unmarried maiden or a married woman. A typical Manipuri name will consist of a first name, that is, a surname or father's family *sagei*, a second name, that is, name of the person, followed by a third name, that is, a title which is generally '*Singh*' for all Manipuris. For example, a Manipuri man's name may be written as '*Arambam Narendra Singh*'. His name does not indicate whether he is married or unmarried; whereas, case is quite different for a Manipuri woman. An unmarried Manipuri girl would use word '*Chanu*' after a maiden's name as a title or a post-positional term to indicate her unmarried status. She may also use '*Devi*' in place of '*Chanu*' after her maiden name which also signifies a Manipuri woman, either married or unmarried. When she writes her name in the manner of writing her husband's surname followed by '*ongbi*' (which means 'married to' in Manipuri), her maiden surname just immediately before her name and then adding '*Devi*' as a post-positional term, it specifically indicates her complete name and identity as a married Manipuri woman. For instance, an unmarried Manipuri girl may write her name as '*Konsam Sarita Chanu*' or '*Konsam Sarita Devi*'. Immediately after her marriage, her name will be written as '*Mutum Ongbi Konsam Sarita Devi*'.

Anybody can identify her name as that of a married woman. Therefore, through these signifiers, the object signified is indicated as Manipuri woman where the interpretation that she is the male 'other' is highlighted who can be only identified by her father's or/and her husband's name.

### **Signifier tracing signified: Role and activities as signifier of identification of Manipuri women**

Role and activities of a Manipuri woman towards her 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 interpretation and signification is manifested in 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 traditional as well as post-traditional level, and meanings generated thereon. For this, let us look into her roles and responsibilities in family in particular and society in general.

#### **Family and household**

Generally speaking, a woman gives her first priority in running and maintaining her family and household smoothly. A Manipuri woman is no exception. She runs her home giving a lot of care and attention. She keeps house and surroundings very clean and hygienic. She maintains her personal physical hygiene and also of her children and elders. In her household chores such as, cooking, cleaning, beautifying the house and compound with flower plants, she is known for her efficiency and neatness which is noticeable. She instils these good habits to her children also. She could not have achieved all these without being laborious and diligent in her work. That is why, a Manipuri woman becomes a sign for her industrious effort to maintain her family and household spic and span.

In her conduct and manner, she is demure and modest. Her immaculate etiquette and propriety in her relation with her parents, husband and her in-laws speak volumes of upbringing she received from the very culture and tradition of Manipuri society. She maintains decency and modesty in dress code. As a married woman, she would cover her head with one end of her *innaphi* in the presence of her in-laws. Her way of

formal make-up when she steps out of house or for participation in any important social occasion is the application of *'tilak'* on her forehead and nose, and an optional *sindoor* (vermilion)/*bindi* in centre of her forehead in between two eyebrows. Below is a table presenting choice of respondents in the use of vermilion (*sindoor*).

**Table no. V: IV. Use of Vermilion (*sindoor*)**

Age Area	Old (married) Age (51-75)				Young (unmarried/married) Age (20-35)/(36-50)				Total			
	Yes	%	No	%	Yes	%	No	%	Yes	%	No	%
Rural	02	03	73	97	-	-	75	100	02	01	148	99
Urban	05	07	70	93	-	-	75	100	05	03	145	97
Total	07	05	143	95	-	-	150	100	07	02	293	98

The choice is found to be preferably less as it does not act as a signifier for the signified concept of Manipuri women.

However, a married woman is hardly noticed without her minimal ornaments of a pair of earrings, a chain around her neck and a pair of bangles around her wrists. Following table will show that all respondents prefer wearing bangles, gold or otherwise to keeping their wrists bare.

**Table no. V:V. Choice of wearing of bangles**

Age Area	Old (married) Age (51-75)				Young (unmarried/married) Age (20-35)/(36-50)				Total			
	Yes	%	No	%	Yes	%	No	%	Yes	%	No	%
Rural	75	100	-	-	75	100	-	-	150	100	-	-
Urban	75	100	-	-	75	100	-	-	150	100	-	-
Total	150	100	-	-	150	100	-	-	300	100	-	-

A Manipuri woman is deeply religious too. She is the one who maintains the two cults, that is, Hinduism and Meiteism, in her daily household affairs in perfect harmony. In this way, we can identify a married Manipuri woman as a sign where her nature, conduct and manner can be interpreted as signifiers which are manifest in family and household affairs of her multi-faceted roles.

**Socio-economic field**

From very ancient times, due to various reasons, the Manipuri women folk depend on each other and constitute group among themselves. They derive a feeling of strength and moral support when they come together in a group and work together. This unique grouping amongst women in performing their daily activities promotes a consciousness for togetherness, an unfailing bond that became a source of strength and spirit in many epoch-making activities throughout the history of Manipur. History of Manipur is resplendent with records of women activities performed with sense of community feeling both in ancient and in modern times too.

***Khulang***

The society being agrarian, rural womenfolk form groups called '*khulang*' to take part in every aspect of farming except ploughing. They start with transplanting paddy saplings. Instead of working individually on their own respective fields, they prefer to work in a group or '*khulang*' in one field after another, thereby, promoting a feeling of bond and dependency on each other to alleviate the sense of burden and boredom altogether. This same *khulang* is again involved during harvesting while reaping paddy, and threshing and winnowing the grains. They enjoy the sense of togetherness and sing along as they work. There are numerous songs composed while working together in fields during farming which are better known as '*khulang eshei*'. Singing of *khulang eshei* made them oblivious of tedium of laborious task they are engaged with. *Khulang* work and *khulang* songs have become signs signified by Manipuri women working in fields in groups to supplement labour of their men folk. This *khulang* still continues sporadically till date.

**Weaving**

As mentioned in earlier chapters, weaving and handloom industry is entirely maintained by women from very ancient times unlike that of other parts of India. They exhibit a penchant for trying out innovative designs on *phanek* and *innaphi* and in other clothing. They show equal expertise in traditional loom as well as imported shuttle looms. Equally proficient are they in embroidery and other related handicrafts too.

Handloom business is controlled by them – right from purchase of raw materials to sale of finished products. Nowadays, women entrepreneurs have come up in a big scale and they keep track of demands of markets outside Manipur and try to meet them as popularity of ethnic Manipuri handloom products increased. Hence, weaving and handloom industry has become signs produced by signifier Manipuri women who knew this art form. For that matter, in olden times, every single Manipuri woman was acquainted with the occupation as it was a pre-requisite talent for them. Weaving and handloom apparatus are given as a compulsory dowry item to every married woman indicating that it should be her occupation besides other household chores. In modern times, Manipuri women are not all engaged in weaving and handloom activities but most of them have an idea of it and know the quality and texture of a clothing product minutely. Nevertheless, due to their consistent effort in producing and maintaining the handloom products, Manipuri women have been able to uphold the said products as a cultural sign of Manipur worldwide.

### *Nupi Keithel*

Besides selling their handloom products, from olden times onwards, Manipuri women used to sell any home produce, be it rice grains, lentils, cereals, vegetables, fruits, fish, firewood, processed sweetmeats, etc. in small or big markets which sprang up in every nook and corner of any locality. The *Khwairamband Bazaar* which was established in 16<sup>th</sup> century became later on, one of the largest markets of Manipur. It is better known as *Nupi keithel* or *Ima* market as it was solely run by women or mothers. In recent times, market place has been renovated and enlarged and it comprised of three diversified markets. Management and administration of this commercial sector still remain in the hands of women.

These markets are the soul of Manipur and Manipuri women as women vendors play a significant role in creating group consciousness and getting motivated and mobilised for any social, economic and political movements throughout history of Manipur. Market becomes a symbol of self-reliance and innate force of Manipuri women that is very often a rare feature in other societies of India. Besides these the market also represents a sign of economic freedom that Manipuri women experience from their men folk.

**Marup**

*Marup* is a kind of self-help kitty money that is very popular in Manipur. Normally, *marup* is organised and managed by women. The kitty can be in cash or in kind. *Marup* are formed for clothing, vehicles, consumer durables, etc. or else for cash money. Many families depend on this *marup* to purchase things beyond their daily needs. There are instances of young women and unmarried girls joining *marup* in preparation of their marriages, and in doing so, relieving their parents and guardians a bit of the burden of the huge expenses to be incurred for their marriages. In table below, number of respondents and their percentage who join *marup* are presented.

**Table no.V:VI. 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

Among urban old women, choice of joining *marup* is a bit less, whereas among young women of rural and urban divide, it is noticeably high.

Besides, there are *marup* constituted especially for wedding and death ceremonies in almost every locality. These *marup* are compulsory contribution by members of locality and are strictly maintained by all. These *marup* are useful aids that become very handy to each member at their crucial time of emergent monetary need.

Hence, *marup* plays an important role in Manipuri community maintaining fellow-feeling, rendering assistance in times of need and thereby strengthening bond that ties women together amongst them. In recent times, it has assumed the nature of a sign which has the signification of the sense of standing for each other and the notion of 'all for one and one for all' of Manipuri women.

**Socio-political field**

Manipuri women enjoyed a high status in society in ancient times and commanded respect and dignity for their knowledge and consciousness of the political affairs of

kingdom. The *Lakkhong* and *Laton*, the two administrative offices of royal household, exclusively run by women and *Pacha* (women's court) bear testimony to that fact. Over and above, royal women were skilled in warfare and war defence strategies too. For the common women, the marketplace which is a venue for livelihood and survival, would also convert into a venue for congregation to share and discuss joys and woes of their families and society at large. Social/societal issues dealing with economic and political matters are deliberated and worked out when women meet in market place. It was in such manner that notion of revolt and uprising took its shape at market place which moulded into epoch-making women movements of 1904 and 1939 in Manipur.

### ***Nupilan of 1904 and 1939***

Two great women movements of 1904 and 1939 were popularly known as *Nupilan* of Manipur. Both these revolutions were mass uprisings, effects of British extremities on social, political and economic issues in general. But these general issues were main concerns of life for Manipuri women. Therefore, their notion to rise up to situation to save and protect general interest of society set as an example of selfless sacrifice and sheer grit and determination to face odds and not to be bogged down with anxiety of failure and negative impacts. Mass woman force derived its strength from physical and moral support of each other and continued movement with increased enthusiasm when outcome of their efforts bore fruits with more people, including men folk, joining and supporting them in their noble cause. These movements further solidified the belief of power of the masses in bringing about change and laid foundations of nationalism in the state of Manipur. The success of the movements also instilled into the women a firm belief of their capability to fight for a cause with dedication for the land and its people. Thus, the movements were epoch-making and glorified efforts and courage of women working in groups. These movements can be considered as signs of mass power and indomitable spirit of Manipuri women for a noble cause.

### ***Meira Paibi***

This same mass force and unflinching spirit for a noble cause is also noticed in activities of *Meira Paibi* which was a culmination of the two women movements in 1970's. Manipuri women of that time began with cleansing society of its anti-social elements



like alcoholism that ruled the night lives of Manipur when government failed to bring positive changes despite declaring the region, a dry state.

Bearing torches in hand, the Manipuri women stood vigil throughout the night, killing their rest and sleep, to safeguard the society from impending devastation. Their duties increased many fold when drug-abuse, insurgency, proliferation of small arms and high level corruption penetrated the very core of Manipur. Their relentless service of being custodians of society may be looked upon as a true sign of their selfless dedication to uphold integrity and peace, joining hands together and their firm conviction that Manipur as a safe haven will see the light of day in future.

### **Protests and strikes by women**

The society is crippled with atrocities of insurgency as well as of Government forces which try to combat insurgency in the State. Most of the times, women are the most victimised. Nowadays, protests, rallies, bandhs and strikes have become the order of the day in Manipur as untoward incidents abound in the State. And it is still the women, whether young or old, who came out in the streets to defend the rights and justice of the people. Thus, Manipuri women have become signs as the true custodian of the society who tries to maintain home and societal affairs with equal fervour.

### **Sharmila's hunger strike**

There is also the instance of Irom Sharmila Devi's continuing hunger strike from November 2001 onwards demanding the repeal of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act of 1958 from the State of Manipur. She has sought to forego the basic needs of human life to achieve what is most precious for the State of Manipur. She has risen as an icon and an international figure for her dedication and sacrifice for peace and integrity of the problem-torn State. She has been kept under police custody for her continuing strike and even charged with attempt to suicide for the same. But she remained undeterred and her spirit and determination never failed even though her appeal still fell on deaf ears of the Indian Government.

### **Service of NGOs**

In recent times, many organisations have mushroomed up for the uplift of the society in general. Rehabilitation homes for victims of alcoholism, narcotic-abuse and

AIDS/HIV are working round the clock to cleanse the society, to save and prevent from further corrosion and provide hope for them in the future. Among other NGOs, there are such organisations, formed by women, which cater to help the victims of State and non-State repression. These organisations assist to provide refuge and rehabilitation to the widows and bereaved families of casualties of political and insurgent killings. Their noble venture is a great endeavour to help rebuild the lives of the trauma-ridden innocent victims of vicious killings.

The following table will throw some light on the interest of the respondents in forming groups or becoming members of groups like *Meira Paibi* or NGOs.

**Table no. V:VII: Interest of respondents to become member of *Meira Paibi* or NGO**

Age Area	Old (married) Age (51-75)				Young (unmarried/married) Age (20-35)/(36-50)				Total			
	Yes	%	No	%	Yes	%	No	%	Yes	%	No	%
Rural	32	43	43	57	44	59	31	41	76	51	74	49
Urban	30	40	45	60	38	51	37	49	68	45	82	55
Total	62	41	88	59	82	55	68	45	144	48	156	52

The table presented indicate that the interest of the respondents is almost fifty per cent or less which is quite a high margin considering the fact of the androgenic society that they belong to.

In this manner, Manipuri women have been making their presence felt and have been an indispensable necessity, continuously working as a sign to bring about socio-political change in the state from earlier times. They have been endeavouring in and contributing to the task of peace-building to make the state a better place to live in.

### **Socio-cultural field**

Rich cultural and traditional heritage of the region has seen the great contributions of women of Manipur since olden times. They have been playing the role of representatives or indicators of Manipuri culture more than their men folk. Through their roles and activities in society, Manipuri women manifest social and cultural

values of the land inherent in them which can be interpreted as signs. A Manipuri woman, therefore, functions as a sign within the structure of Manipuri society; and the codes at work in the fabric of society represent values of culture and are able to generate shades of connotation as signification as an aspect of life.

### ***Khundau Shuba***

*Khundau Shuba* is a type of community service which is prevalent in Manipuri society since ancient times. Every *leikai* or locality has certain norms and codes of conduct that is maintained by all members of locality. They form a society where societal service through contributory work, monetary contributions, etc., is rendered by all members whenever a social and cultural ceremony occurs in the locality. Whether it is a ceremony of marriage, death, birth, or any other event, members of the locality extend their service and help to the concerned family in preparation of the said ceremony. At least one member of each household acts as a representative to offer help in any possible way to the concerned family. Normally women participate in community activity with full support and co-operation. Participation of women and their eagerness can be well understood from the table given below.

**Table no.V:VIII: Participation of women in *Khundau Shuba***

Age Area	Old (married) Age (51-75)				Young (unmarried/married) Age (20-35)/(36-50)				Total			
	Yes	%	No	%	Yes	%	No	%	Yes	%	No	%
Rural	65	87	10	13	50	67	25	33	115	77	35	23
Urban	58	77	17	23	43	57	32	43	101	67	49	33
Total	123	82	27	18	93	62	57	38	216	72	84	28

*Khundau Shuba* is still popular among young and old women folks, be it in rural or urban society. Only in rare cases of physically inability due to personal ailments or engagements or in unavoidable circumstances, women excuse themselves from such responsibility.

Elderly women are usually engaged in making '*paan*' plates called '*kwatangla*' (quarter-sized plates made out of banana leaves) for arranging betel nut, betel leaves, lime, aniseeds, cardamom, a slice of coconut, etc. on them and other works like

arranging fruits, vegetables and other eatables, while the young girls help by preparing tea and refreshments for everybody present there as well as washing and cleaning of utensils and crockery.

It is usually noticed that none refrains from performing such community service even today. It promotes fellow-feeling and especially female bonding which is a positive aspect of community and cultural life in the region. Manipuri women, through such co-operative service, have been assumed as a sign for their societal concern and social activities that they perform and the active roles they play in socio-cultural milieu of the locality. This sort of community service where women meet and share among themselves a lot of information and news about each other as well as information of the outside world, make them aware of and keep them abreast of the various changes that are taking place currently across the globe. These activities keep them well-informed and encourage them collectively to think and plan for strategies for any developmental changes they want to bring about in locality and society as a whole. The signification of welfare of the society is firmly rooted in such group activities of the society by ever self-reliant Manipuri women.

### **Role of *Maibi***

According to old Meitei cult, which is known as Meiteism or Sanamahism, we come to know that the *Maiba* and the *Maibi* are priest and priestess of that faith. Any religious ritual or ceremony of Meitei faith is performed by *Maiba* and *Maibi*. They had independent *Loishangs* (institutions) separately which were maintained and had great power and influence over people in pre-Hindu days. In modern times too, some *Loishangs* still exist and are well-maintained.

Though both *Maiba* and *Maibi* are part and parcel of the indigenous faith which is still followed along with Vaishnavism by Manipuri, the role of *Maibi* becomes even more significant in various rituals and ceremonies. At first, existence of a priestess in a religious cult is a rare and unique phenomenon normally not found in other male-hegemonic religions. That a *Maibi* is a recognised priestess, well-accepted and respected by Manipuri society, is a true sign of the high status bestowed on women in the community.

Maibis are born for such profession in the sense that nobody knows when she would be transformed to a Maibi. Symptoms would appear and person will be compelled to follow this profession mostly by a tragic call of fate. A person so chosen will serve as an apprentice to a professional Maibi. Her name will be registered as one of the god or goddess.

In *Lai Haraoba* festival, which is the most important religious ceremony of *Meitei* cult since olden times, the role of Maibi is significant and therefore, indispensable. Apart from performing religious rites, Maibis, as a group, join in a dance of creation to please the Meitei deities. They fall into a trance with their bodies trembling violently with excitement and very often foretell the future of any individual or society as a whole. Spirit of particular god or goddess is supposed to have entered the body of Maibi and this usual phenomenon is known as *Maibi Lai Tongba*. Maibi then sits and speaks from a new medium with a white cloth covering her entire body and with a bell ringing in her left hand. That she is blessed with occult powers to be connected with the '*Lai*' (deity/God) and utter predictions is a very significant feature to be reckoned with. As for that, a Maibi is also treated with awe by Manipuri society. However, their impact on younger generation in their personal lives seems to be diminishing gradually. Below is a table that presents the importance and influence of Maibis on personal lives of respondents in recent times.

**Table no. V:IX: Importance and influence of Maibi**

Age Area	Old (married) Age (51-75)				Young (unmarried/married) Age (20-35)/(36-50)				Total			
	Yes	%	No	%	Yes	%	No	%	Yes	%	No	%
Rural	54	72	21	28	38	51	37	49	92	61	58	39
Urban	41	55	34	45	26	35	49	65	67	45	83	55
Total	95	63	55	37	64	43	86	57	159	53	141	47

It is found that the rural old women still believe and favour the occult powers of Maibis.

Being a woman who receives the call of divine inspiration out of the blue which makes her become a Maibi sounds somewhat incredible yet it is true. Her supine-

white dress code, her conduct and manner, her distinctive personality and her divine providence of occultism can be designated as symbols of high position a priestess can earn in the androgenic Manipuri society.

### Classical dance and Sankirtan

After the advent of Hinduism of the Vaishnavite cult in Manipur, it is usually found that Manipuri women took major role of maintaining the newly-adopted religion in their daily family and societal lives. Though illiterate in those early days of conversion, they were the ones who took active part in singing devotional songs and performing devotional dances. The famous *Ras Leela* introduced by Maharaj Bhagyachandra had only female dancers. Ras Leela is a dance of Lord Krishna and Radha and the Gopis (female friends) where participants are all girls or young women. Learning dancing and singing from an early age by girls is considered respectful and honourable from ancient times. Ras Leela performances, which represent the very soul of Hindu Vaishnavite cult in Manipur, have earned much admiration and accolades worldwide. Even in recent times, parents give ample interest in making their children learn music and dancing. The following table will highlight that point of interest shown by parents.

**Table no. V:X: Interest of young married women to make their children learn music and dance**

Age Area	Young (married) Age (20-35)/(36-50)			
	Yes	%	No	%
Rural	38	69	17	31
Urban	29	53	26	47
Total	67	61	43	39

Responses are collected from 110 young married women only. Young mothers in rural areas give more preference and interest towards their children imbibing music and dancing than those of urban areas though their percentage is not much less.

Apart from Ras Leela, there are *Pala Sankirtan*, *Khubak Eshei* (devotional songs sung with clapping of hands), etc., performed exclusively by women. *Pala Sankirtan* is a major part of wedding and death ceremonies which are nowadays performed by professional women. They have formed *Pala Sankirtan* troupes and are achieving a lot of appreciation and popularity in and around the state.

In this manner, Manipuri women have become a symbol for the spread of cultural tradition and maintenance of the same in their society wherever Manipuri have made their settlements. They can be interpreted as a sign for their attachment and strict adherence of age-old rich culture and tradition of Manipur.

### **Education and literary field**

Education in Manipur has a long history of different stages of development beginning from its early stage during the pre-Hinduisation period till it reached its maturity in modern times since the British rule in the state. Due to patriarchal society, Manipuri women received western education rather late, that is, only from year 1899 onwards. When the Tamphasana girls' school was established in 1935, enrolment of girls for primary education increased a bit. However, since then, they have not looked back. Its impact is widely prominent in the society.

### **Working women**

A Manipuri woman has always been able to manage her time and energy for her home and hearth, and other societal affairs with equal ease. Besides, managing her household, she could equally manage gardening, fishing, weaving, etc. not only for her domestic needs but also for commercial purpose as a means of livelihood or to earn some extra money. Since she has been performing such activities from earlier times, becoming a working woman in modern times is no big deal for a Manipuri woman. Many women desire to work, earn and be financially independent. The following table will show number of respondents who want to be economically independent.

**Table no. V:XI: Choice of being financially independent**

Age Area	Old (married) Age (51-75)				Young (unmarried/married) Age (20-35)/(36-50)				Total			
	Yes	%	No	%	Yes	%	No	%	Yes	%	No	%
Rural	48	64	27	36	59	79	16	21	107	71	43	29
Urban	53	71	22	29	64	85	11	15	117	78	33	22
Total	101	67	49	33	123	82	27	18	224	75	26	25

We come to know from the table that maximum of the women, young and old, prefer to be economically independent from their male counterparts.

Though education and literacy for women came at a later stage in Manipur and faced a lot of hindrances in the initial stage, yet the women, slowly but steadily, by dint of their persevering spirit, picked up the loose strings of learning reading and writing. And in course of time, they got themselves employed in jobs and began the ever-bustling life of working women. Managing a traditional household and meeting the demands of modern work culture were somewhat trying at times but Manipuri women took it in their strides with calm composure.

In recent times, number of women who received the light of education has increased radically, and so also is the number of career-oriented women. Many parents send their children to other parts of India and abroad to avail better opportunities in education and career. Nowadays, a number of girls and women work and settle outside Manipur after completion of their studies. Manipuri women are no longer confined to domestic work and traditional occupation alone for their livelihood anymore. A paradigm shift has been evident in case of women and their outlook from traditional and idealised representation to modern signification in the context of Manipuri patriarchal society. A shift of priorities to modern global culture to be in parity with women of today's world is the urge for many women, though they seem to never forget or get detached from their roots or the very soil that has shaped their personality and outlook. In it lie distinctive traits of Manipuri women so often glorified in the annals of Manipur's history.



### **Early women writers**

The early Manipuri women writers were inspired by their contemporary male writers who wrote about them and their plights in the male-dominated Manipuri society. These women started to think anew about themselves, their role and position in moulding the society. They began writing about themselves and gradually developed a feminine style of writing. Gender discrimination and the liberation of women from the shackles of male dominance in the society were regular themes in their writings. We notice this strain of thoughts and themes in the short stories of Thoibi Devi who is best known as the first woman novelist in the realm of Manipuri literature. Besides translations and adaptations, she had also written a number of novels, short stories, lyrics and critical writings.

The portrayal of strong, powerful and independent female characters recurred in many of the women's writings. M.K. Binodini, one of the pioneers, introduced the independent woman in her female characters that threatened to challenge for space on traditional male territory. Her only novel "*Boro Saheb Ongbi Sanatombi*", set against the backdrop of the Anglo-Manipur War of 1891 and its aftermath, reveals the case of *Sanatombi*, a Manipuri woman who falls in love with a White man, Maxwell, the then Political Agent of Manipur. Her spontaneous and liberal outlook of life echoes of the emerging female power which attempts to challenge the norms of male hegemony prevalent in the Manipuri society. Her ostracism is marked with the indictment of the conservative society where the personal is political.<sup>3</sup>

Another pioneer among women writers is Khaidem Promodini Devi whose works include almost all the genres of literature, that is, poetry short stories, drama, legends, travelogues, film scripts, biographies and essays. Her writings concentrated on the cause of the economic liberation of women so as to emerge from the oppression of male dominance.

### **Post-traditional Manipuri women: The speaking subject as sign of subversion**

Feminist semiotics aims at appraising the limitations of meta-narratives and then revamping them creatively. Feminist stance in semiotics acts as a critique to structuralist positivism and would identify rambling angle of its paradigms as

representations which structure the real aspect. Post-structuralist theories of meaning with its multiplicity and ideological perspectives have been profited by as well as have promoted feminist semioticians. Semiotics, as a science, is self-reflexive and critical of theories of representation of other sciences. Semiotics requires adoption of a subjective theory to understand relation between individuals and social processes involved in signification. Subjective individual and process of semiosis are closely related which facilitates feminist semioticians to develop and promote women as speaking subjects of theory. In this manner, they are able to displace the male concept of woman as the 'other' of well-constituted, rational and independent subject. Feminist reworking of meta-narratives has been able to introduce subjectivity, intertextuality, differential areas of signification, representation, narrative, non-linguistic signifying processes, etc. to semiotic theory.<sup>4</sup> Feminist stance in semiotics is most often represented by feminist writers especially in their poetic works and forms new trend in literature of present times. In the poetic text, the subject is classified between 'semiotic' (an unconscious archaic feminine principle) and 'symbolic' (rational name/law of father). In this way, subjectivity is formed within the poetic language with decentralisation of symbolism in culture.<sup>5</sup>

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

### **Women activists**

One such instance of the Manipuri women activists is the nude protest march of 2004 that immediately followed the Manorama murder case as an aftermath. It was a case which was caught in the whirlwind of repression between State and non-State forces. A huge protest march was immediately launched by the women of Manipur where some elderly women took extreme steps to ventilate their anger and distress against such heinous crimes. The nude protest showcased their bodies which turned out to be

markers or signs of their identity and ‘otherness’ against the power of the masculine State that acts as an observer and yet dominates. The women became the subject of gaze and such virtual representation became images of protests which they employed in their fight against repressive hegemony. In doing so, Manipuri women have thrown a challenge to the general codes of representation and cultural implications attached to the female body. This is one such paradigm shift as women use their bodies as subjects of subversion from the normal process of interpretation.<sup>6</sup>

### **Feminist women writers**

While among post-traditional women writings, a significant paradigm shift in representation of women in Manipuri literature was conspicuous in later part of 20<sup>th</sup> century. Especially, Manipuri poetry of that period aimed at presenting the women as poets see them or try to see them and understand their feelings, thoughts and ideas. A new crop of feminist women writers emerged who began to question and argue on the disparity they encounter in their status and hardships they endure in the society. Social constraints have restricted women to raise their voices and question the predominant doctrinal traits attributed to women prescribed by male-favoured society. Some writers relate husband-wife relationship to that of master and servant.

The following table below will give a fairly clear picture of man-woman relationship among young married women of present situation.

**Table no. V:XII: Post-traditional Manipuri women as signifiers subverting paradigm as speaking subject**

Description	Under husband’s control				Self-dependent				Rising to the occasion			
	Yes	%	No	%	Yes	%	No	%	Yes	%	No	%
Rural	41	75	14	25	36	65	19	35	31	56	24	44
Urban	35	64	20	36	42	76	13	24	37	67	18	33
Total	76	69	34	31	78	71	32	29	68	62	42	38

Data are collected from 110 young married women only. Most of them are under husband’s control. However some couples nowadays show a bit of mutual understanding. Number of self-dependent women exceeds dependent women and women who rise to occasion are also more than those who do not.

These women writers do not intend to attack men with anti-male propaganda. Rather, they want women to firmly believe in their own strength and qualities, as true human beings and not children of lesser gods. Writers like Memchoubi trace myths and legends of ancient times and manifests them with a new meaning and a path to lead on. Her woman is one who adds to richness of life and who believes in the power and quality of a woman. Her woman is in no way synonymous to the ‘new woman’ created by western feminists. She is neither fiery nor subservient in her demeanour. She is hardly an attacker but more of a defender. She possesses enormous moral strength and spirit that helps her to perform her womanly tasks and endure long-sufferings, besides being a protector and custodian of society at large. Memchoubi epitomises Manipuri new woman as a mother-figure who shoulders all her responsibilities with unabated spirit and fervour. Her poem, *Eigi Palem Nungshibi* (My Beloved Mother), is eloquent in projecting the true essence of Manipuri woman. Here, she portrays predicaments of a hillwoman mother, who, though born as a ‘daughter of a mountain chief’, ‘serene’ and ‘stately’ in her nature, carries a heavy basket on her back and trudges along the hill ranges. When stopped by the poet to inquire what she carried, she responded as such---

“Here, have a look,” mother said and  
 Bending, showed me the load on her back  
 Never disburdening herself even for a moment,  
 I looked, eager to know what she was carrying, and  
 Found inside that basket, mother’s own basket,  
 Her old husband and  
 Her son flushed with youth.  
 Wondering I asked  
 “What is this, mother?”  
 Mother looked at me only once  
 Then calmly said---  
 “How would they survive  
 If not carried by me?”  
 Without saying another word  
 She went ahead just like before  
 Calm and composed  
 That beloved mother of mine.<sup>7</sup>

Feminist writing did not come easily for women writers who were under male domination. They were doubtful about how their writing on their experiences as women will be received by others. Nevertheless, with the knowledge of gender sensitisation that is prevalent in world around them, they have started to express their feelings and thoughts without inhibition. Poets like S. Bhanumati, who used to advocate traditional womanhood, began to pose questions on a woman's space in the home too.

Manipuri literature, mainly poetry of 21<sup>st</sup> century is a form of resistance and rebellion. As a part of literature, it can be a medium for building of a new world and a new moral system akin to politics of feminism. In this way, poetry can be a means as well as an end. It can provoke a reader to understand her womanhood and realise what she wants from her life. Once a woman claims her body and soul, no one can suppress or conquer her.

In modern times, feminism is related with peaceful non-violent co-operation and making the personal political and vice versa. It also signifies reconciliation rather than victory. Such feminism has taught Manipuri women to value and respect themselves and their work and also to demand that respect from others. Manipuri literature of present times is based on this kind of feminism along with the region's unique features in socio, economic, political and cultural matters. It is through writings of women poets of Manipur that we notice feminist poetry of the kind, which suits the Manipur context. Hence, these women writers qualify as signs with representation of this sort of unique feminist writing in Manipuri literature.

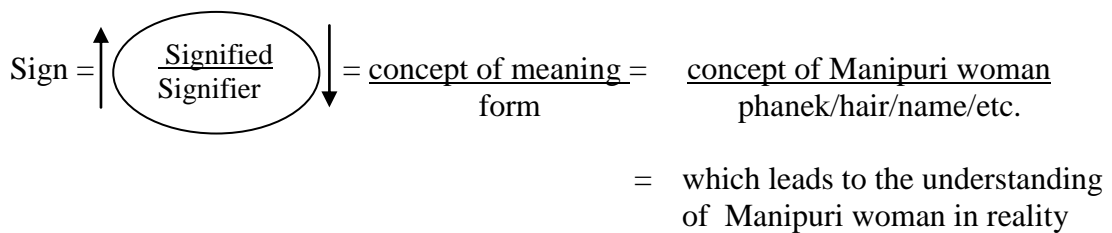
### **Conclusion**

Semiotics as defined in this paper can be represented by many diverse shapes, forms and imagery. In Manipuri culture, these symbols are demonstrated to consumers through a wide variety of communication which include visual, audio, role and diverse activities.<sup>8</sup> Semiosis between symbols in itself is what people hyper-sensationalise as attracting attention to Manipuri women. Manipuri women have 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. Signs are organised into languages and it is the existence of common languages which enable us

to translate our thoughts into words, sounds or images, and then to use these, operating as a language, to express meanings and communicate thoughts to other people.

Saussure stated that the object of a study cannot be at first to the view point; in other words, there are hidden messages behind the symbolism. Linguistic phenomena can be always found in different aspects in which are dependent on one another.<sup>9</sup>

Role 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 becomes 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. Symbolic and indexical signs evoke a sense of iconic sign mentally of Manipuri woman naturally (of a particular). It is to be noted that when we speak of an icon, an index or a symbol, we are not referring to objective qualities of a sign itself, but a viewer's experience of the sign. Since this helps in forming a pragmatic study of an authentic picture of a particular culture of a society, it is very much related to sociological studies and hence the importance and relevance of the work.



In case of *phanek*, for example, and for that matter any social element conventionally accepted as code of the culture, for its validity to be qualified as signifier depends on its use in the context of the culture where it is used. But if it is used by a woman of a different community, its context is changed. And hence, '*phanek*' does not have that signified as in the case when it is used by a Manipuri woman. This is how the same signifier produces different signifieds.

Thus, through semiotics, we come to know that reality can be associated to a system of signs. Therefore, semiotics can help us to understand reality as a construction and

of the roles played by ourselves and others in constructing it. It can also make us aware that information or meaning is actually created by ourselves unknowingly through a complex interplay of codes or convention. Knowledge of such codes makes us equipped with intellectual empowerment. Through semiotics we are made aware of the world of signs in which we live. Our understanding of the world is depended entirely on these signs and codes into which they are organised. The study of semiotics helps us to understand that these signs are generally visible yet remain concealed from understanding them. Hence clarity of codes by which signs are interpreted should be enhanced so that the signs can be explained semiotically. Realities of signs need to be deconstructed and contested to show whose realities are privileged and whose are suppressed. We can safely conclude that study of signs is directly related to study of construction and maintenance of reality.<sup>10</sup>