

# Women and Sexism in Meiteilon

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines elements of sexism in Meiteilon and its effect on socialization of Meitei women of Manipur, one of the north-eastern states of India. It is based on an area-specific research conducted on the sexist language expressions restricted to casual speech, as well as gossips, idioms and proverbial expressions on Meitei women through a grounded theory approach with primary and secondary sources. This paper explains how sexism has entered in the language system and tends to discriminate against women by rendering them invisible or underestimating them, and at the same time it indicates notions of male supremacy. The Meitei community displays gender stereotype and demarcation of gender roles through the implementation of language as a medium. These negative traditional cultural views, norms and practices fortify negative perceptions about the female body that maintain patriarchal subordination of women and girls.

**Keywords:** Meitei women, Meiteilon, sexism, proverbs.

## INTRODUCTION

*“Language shapes the way we think, and determines what we can think about”*  
Benjamin Atwood Lee Whorf, American linguist and fire prevention engineer (1897-1941).

Inequalities between genders are multidimensional. Language is an important part of any culture. ‘Language is both an individual possession and a social possession’ (Wardhaugh 116). Language reflects culture and affects socialization. It is an instrument for female oppression by males. As a matter of fact, language not only reflects a patriarchal system but also emphasizes male supremacy over women. According to Christine in pragmatics, the investigations focus on language used in terms of speech or

writing and explicit or implicit assumption made about the communicative function of language and the dynamics of linguistic interaction. Women are classified as sympathetic, rapport, listening, private, connecting, supportive, and intimate. However, men are considered as problem-solving, report, lecturing, public, oppositional and independent. Women are seen to have the sense of nurturing so that they can function as a good mother, while on men's characteristics, it shows that men have power and position in public (17). According to Jimenez and Rose, "By means of language, we shape our view of society, we organize our knowledge; we learn new things and, above all, we assimilate the norms and social patterns of our community" (209).

Sexism is the use of language, which depreciates members of one sex, most of the time, women and this supports gender inequality, discriminates against women by rendering them invisible or trivializing them, and at the same time it perpetuates notions of male dominance (Swim et al. 117-128). Prior work on stereotypical language has identified the causes of prejudice in languages as being rooted in an androcentric view of the universe (Cameron 134; Mc Connell-Ginet 124), but not the social mechanisms involved in how it is historically produced and reproduced. Kalia brings in an interesting discussion about the issue of sexism and language. Sexism in language allows an ideology to legitimize the prescriptions and appraisals of every human endeavour solely on the classifications of gender. Language uses us as far as we use language, so sexist language vents, spreads and reinforces sex role stereotypes. Sexist language conveys prejudice through the everyday vocabulary used in social intercourse. Many gender-related words metaphorically insult or belittle women by identifying them as children, animals or objects: girl, baby, dish, chick, hot-tomato, bitch, dog and sugar etc. Through exclusionary devices, sexist language restrains one gender from pursuing activities similar to those allowed to the other gender in the same society (794-97).

The transmission of fixed, stereotypical ideas and cultural metaphors about women and how these patriarchal truth claims propagate certain myths about women, thus linguistically submerging their identity (Lakoff 1975). This not only curbs women's expressive potential but also systematically severs them from participating in the power relations of the society (Foucault, 777-795). The location of gender bias in language defines and dehumanises individuals simultaneously (Bosmajian 305-313).

Dutta claims Assamese language shares similar patriarchal bias as it promotes gender inequalities and blatant sexism (2008). Bhuyan & Narah throws light on the predominance of masculine interpretations and underscores the hierarchal power dynamics in the propagation of myths, traditional dogmas relating to women (711). Das asserts that the embodiment of sexism in the proverbial expressions in Assam often assigned an inferior status to women and that, from local to global, biasness against women is still widespread despite rising awareness about the politics of language in a homosocial world (2023).

Pramodini proclaims that majority of the abusive language is directed at female sexual behaviour, implying the inferior position of women e.g. *nepa-thoray-maca* (nepa-tara-maca) ‘child of ten fathers’ occurs exclusively in the speech of old men. Other abusive expression *nepa-yanni-maca* (child of many fathers, lit. child of mixed fathers) occurs exclusively in the speech of old women (51). Books like ‘*Meiteigiporou poutak akhomba*’ by Nipamacha (1981) and ‘*Meiteiporou war*’ by Barmani (1993) are very rare contributions toward excavating Meiteilon proverbial expression, in Meiteilon but without a particular focus on the use of the sexist language and it’s problematic.

Historically, Meitei women had a high social and economic status. They were major economic contributors both in subsistence and trading activities and also had a considerable voice in the political sphere. Generally, women in the North East are viewed as having more freedom. However, this does not mean that the society is free from all social evils. It has revealed that though women do not feel the brunt of social evils like female foeticide, child betrothal, female infanticide, child marriage, dowry related harassment, bride burning and prohibition of widow remarriage etc., they suffer immensely due to male dominance, both physically and mentally. There are very strict gender rules and norms that define the roles, responsibilities and attributes of Meitei women. To overcome this, she must internalize certain societal values through the process of socialization and social control. There are some characteristic features of good Meitei woman. She should be calm and quiet (*eng-tappi*), modest and shy (*mong-hadabi* and *ekaithibi*), one that is aware of customs and traditions (*houna-lonchat khangbi*), one that obeys commands (*haiba inbi*) one that serves her husband and in-laws well (*mapuroiba amadi manem-maku seba fajana toubi*) etc. The Meitei community has had a son preference because a son makes sure that the family lineage will be carried

forward. A mother, whose eldest, is a son gets social recognition and enjoys the privilege of initiating every ritual generally assigned to womenfolk. If a woman bears only daughters, it is said that a family dies out as a consequence of having no one to carry on the family's lineage.

## OBJECTIVE

Almost no detailed or systematic studies have been done on the issue of sexism in the Meiteilon in Manipur. The main objective of this paper is to examine elements of sexism in Meiteilon (one of the official languages and lingua-franca of the state of Manipur) and its effect on socialization of Meitei women of Manipur, one of the north-eastern states of India bounded on the east by Upper Myanmar, on the west by Cachar District of Assam, on the north by Nagaland and on the south by the Chin Hills of Myanmar and Mizoram.

## HYPOTHESIS

There is a relationship between sexism in Meiteilon and socialization of Meitei women.

## METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on an area specific research conducted on the sexist language expressions restricted to casual speech, as well as gossips, idioms and proverbial expressions on Meitei women through a grounded theory approach with primary and secondary sources. Primary data were collected by adopting an interview method with adult native speakers of Meiteilon having some personalities selected on the basis of random sampling. Secondary sources such as books, journals and other relevant literary texts were used to collect data. Some of the data on the paper is also based on the experience and perspectives of the researcher's day to day life. The analysis of the current study is rooted primarily in exploratory analysis based on reliable data augmented by theories and ideas related to language and gender which is an amazing way of expressing our thoughts and feelings.

## ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

When we use language, besides communicating our individual thoughts, ideas, views and opinions it also reflects our socio-cultural values, beliefs, traditions and practices of the community to which we belong. Linguistic

sexism on Meitei women that are described through words can be best explored in consideration of the casual speech, along with gossips, idioms and proverbial expressions. Some examples are given below:

*‘Nupa-na panjao pui, nupi-na makup mata pui’*

This proverb emphasizes men bear major responsibilities while women take minor ones. In all aspects of life, men were clearly seen to be more authoritative, and women were seen as the opposite.

*‘Nupigi mathoudi chak insang thongba, kollik wairam sengba amadi phisa lonsabani’*

It means the primary duty of the female is to do household management work (cooking, washing and cleaning utensils) and weaving.

*‘Chak-inshang thongba heitrabadi kanana nangbu loubigadouribano’*

If you don’t learn to cook then who will want to wed you?

The girls were taught the culinary skills from the young age as it is believed that women who do not know how to cook would go through difficulty in finding a spouse.

*‘nupadi taragi mapuni’*

It is a Meitei saying which means that a man is the master of ten (means master of ten wives). Meitei community encourage polygyny.

*‘Nupina luhong-phan anirak phamheide’*

Women must not sit on the wedding seat/bench twice.

In Meitei society widow and divorcee remarriage were allowed but no practical ceremony is made for remarriage. There are no drawbacks on widow and divorcee remarriage if she wants to but are not encouraged unless they are very young.

*‘Nupidi nakhut channaba warak-u’*

‘Whet your knife on the grindstone’ – which means it is the duty of the husband to keep the wife under his control by any means, is a socially sanctioned and accepted norm. This is a clear indication of domestic violence.

*‘Masa ma-u phaba nachanupa ama pok-charo’*

‘May you give birth to a healthy son’ is common blessing given to newlywed and pregnant women.

*‘Nachanupa semgedi haidraga, kari kannanaba mayum pankhigadaba nachanupi semlibano’*

This implies that it is more convenient to spend money on one's sons rather than spending on daughters who will be married off to someone.

*'Nupina mahei yamna tamlaga kari kannadoino, mahei tamlingeida yum panba thengnanabani'*

What is the use of highly educated women, her marriage will be delayed while studying. In Meitei society even if women are not deprived from getting higher studies, women are not always made to pursue higher studies.

*'Nupigidi nupa aphaaba/enakhunba ama phangladi yare'*

Women should just get married to a guy who is good/rich. It means the destiny of female depends upon her husband.

*'Nupamachanabu kappara,nupimacha malladana'*

Does a boy cry, acting like a girl. The common saying to male children when they weep.

*'Nupa haibasidi nupani,nupidi khongpham ama soikhibada loire'.*

It means a man is a man, and nothing is lost in case anything happens to him, but for a woman, her life will be ruined if she ever takes a wrong step.

*'Nupigi thamoidi leinadagi henna thotli'*

A woman's heart is softer than a flower's petal.

*'Nupidi ayambana minungsi chaogalli'*

'Generally women have a big heart'.

*'Nupina khunai sembani'*

Women make up a society (negative connotation).

*'Meitei samajdi nupina thakpani'*

Which means Meitei society is maintained / fed by women (negative connotation).

*'Nupidagi lanjao thokpani'*

Women are the reasons for war (negative connotation).

*'Nahakshi wa yamna yame'*

You're too sensitive. (You're overly sensitive or making a big deal out of nothing).

*'Nupisingsina ashuk yamna miwa ngangnaba pamlibasi karigino'*

Why do women like to gossip so much?

*‘Nupi ahum/mari punkhrabadi ngayonphamga chap mannare’*

Three/four women together make a fish market. It means a small group of women can cause chattering noises.

*‘Punglon gi matung enna jagoi sao’*

Dance in accordance with the tunes of the *pung* (an indigenous form of hand drum found in Manipur). Its connotation is that life of a woman is very uncertain but she should adapt to whatever situation that comes to her way.

*‘Nupi haibasidi esingni leiru leiruba patradugi maongda honggadouribani’*

Women are like water. They take the form of the container on which they’re poured.

*‘Taibangpan sebatnabi’*

Culturally-deprived woman (negative connotation).

*‘Higaiwa kamsinganu’*

Don’t spread hateful ideas by gossiping (negative connotation).

*‘Mahasigeijan’*

Dammed (hated) even by god (negative connotation).

*‘Soren-nupi’*

Witch (bitch) (negative connotation).

*‘Masigi nupisi hingchabi changbani’*

This woman is possessed by evil spirits (negative connotation)

*‘Matangi Helloi’*

Fairy nymph (negative connotation)

*‘Corona koubi hingchabi’*

Corona, you witch. In this saying the corona virus is gendered.

*‘Nupigi yumnak sagei leite’*

Females do not have family names and clans. Before marriage, they are defined in terms of their father’s family names and clans, and after marriage, in terms of their husband’s family names and clans.

*‘Aloogi mathel, nupigi yumnak’*

Different cuisines of potato and different surnames of women.

It indicates the statistical position of a woman, implying that like a potato that does not belong to a single cuisine, a woman also doesn't belong to a surname. It implies that a woman must follow her husband's surname without considering her interest or feelings.

*'Sangi sangon nupigi yumpham tamba ngamde'*

Sheds of cattle and homesteads of women cannot be predicted. It is often believed that the fate of a woman is known only after marriage.

*'Nasak phajeji haina chaothok-kanu, laithok amukta loijani'*

Don't be pompous about your appearance; it will vanish away with chickenpox. Never be proud of a good physical appearance. They will get lost one day due to some unexpected incident.

*'Aon Aon chabi numitlei gumbi'*

Eating from different places by changing the sides of the face like a sunflower (negative connotation).

*'Khalla-Khallaga- koi-jomba-phangbane'*

If you continue choosing you will get a husband with long beard. It means 'if you are too picky, you will end up marrying the wrong person'

*'Mamana maramchat chumdragabu machana karam haina jugot chadoino'*

If the mother has bad character, how will her children be good?

*'Nupidi nupidouna chatlu'*

Walk elegantly like a lady; a lady walks elegantly.

*'Nabung noupuwa gi matou tamba yabara nangna'*

Don't compare yourself to your brothers. Girls are not supposed to fight back even if they are right.

*'Nupina nupi namthabani'* Women belittling women, is a commonly used phrase we came across that describes the condition in the Meitei society (negative connotation).

*'Nupina hek paladana'*

Women's supremacy in the household (negative connotation).

*'Heipasingbi'*

Women who act smart (negative connotation).



*‘Toungambi’*

Women who are capable (negative connotation).

*‘Nupiwa louba hounade’*

Which means anyone should not take into account the decision of the female.

*‘Nupi macha asigidamakta nangna wasakpa saradana’*

You swear a lot for a girl.

*‘Nupidi nongmada ahumrak pangthei’*

A woman becomes stupid three times a day (sarcastic remark).

*‘Nupi Angang San Brahman gi wa louba yaba natte’*

Women, Children, Cattle and Brahmin’s words are not to be trusted. It is not worthy hearing what women say. Women are seen as ignorant and weak minded. Women’s voice are not given weight and left out as just ‘women’s words’.

*‘Mounabu madugi phijettu setpara’*

Do married women even wear such dresses?

A married woman is made to follow certain traditional dress codes. She has to wear a *phanek* (sarong worn to cover the lower part of the body by women) and an *innafi* (shawl wrap for the upper body) and tie her hair into a bun.

*‘Nanggi chahiduga nangna setli-elliba phiduga chanadre’*

These bright types of colours don’t suit a woman of your age.

*‘Nanggi bra mari ure’*

Your bra strap is visible.

*‘Nanggi peticot mapan ure’*

Your petticoat edge is visible.

*‘Kari nupino karam haina thouriba garino’*

How are you driving the car? Bloody lady driver!

*‘Hanuthangda napam youjani nang’*

You’ll reach your paternal home at such an old age. This saying indicates a cultural sanction to normalize divorce incurred on aged women. This

indicated the extreme patriarchal mind-set of men towards women and specifically to their wives.

Meitei saying '*nupidi tangjabi urini*' means women are dependent and they cannot live without supporters.

*'Uri gum upal/pamel da yetchage, narum thupna hingjage, nungshi thougal tou jage- pamu seba fanghanbiyu'*

'Let me cling / creep to you like a creeper clings to a tree, let me live in your shadows; let me provide the service to you', normalizes dependence on male as an ideal of romanticization. By comparing the females to an *uri* (creeper/climber) and the male to an *upal* (tree), it portrays women as weak and passive, aspiring to be submissive and dependent on men.

*'Echa phataba chaoba ngaiba, ewa phataba siba ngaiba'*

Waiting for bad kids to grow up, waiting for bad husband to die.

Since a married woman cannot leave her bad kids and bad husband due to her family responsibility, she waits for her kids to grow up and for her husband to die.

*'Mapuroibagee maran nokna chai, machagee maran kapna chai'*

A wife happily eats her husband's wealth, but cries when eating her son's. It means after marriage, women depend first on her husband, then on her son.

As it is accepted in most societies certain names are used to represent a woman's character. Likewise in Meitei community, people also use certain derogatory and profane terms, such as, an angry woman who is called "*eshoulangbi/hingchabi*" and a woman who is very noisy are called "*Nupi Kwak/Nupi Charoi*" (crow and black drongo).

The derogatory remarks against the women with illicit relationship are very obvious in the following words: *lamchat naidabi*, *oktabi*, *kasubi* (borrowed from Hindi), *besa* (derived from Sanskrit), *lamsa*; terms that can be equated with 'slut' or 'whore' or 'prostitute'.

An unmarried woman is called "*Mawanaiba khangdabi*".

Even while the husband dies a premature death, the wife always faces verbal abuses of different sorts from the people in the locality including her own family members. A widow is called "*Mawa Chabi*" i.e., husband eater.

A woman who is barren is an unfortunate called "*Akhungbi*".

The utterances cited above display misogynistic sentiment which are circulated from generation to generation. Sexism is apparent in Meiteilon just like other languages. The Meitei community displays gender stereotypes and demarcation of gender roles through the implementation of language as a medium. The same age-old narratives about women keep being passed down from one generation to the other as can be seen through the different oral sayings such as casual speech, as well as gossips, idioms and proverbial expressions of the Meitei community, in which women are denied their self-dignity and rightful status. The result of the study shows that there is a complementary relationship between sexism in Meiteilon and socialization of Meitei women.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

It has been made positively clear by research that our thinking is influenced by our language. The language used to represent women in our community is typically gendered. The collected data shows that women are lower class subordinate members of Meitei community.

This study portrayed how sexism has entered in the language system and tends to discriminate against women by rendering them invisible or underestimating them, and at the same time it indicates notions of male supremacy.

The important finding of the research is that the representation of sexism in the casual speech, as well as gossips, idioms and proverbial expressions in Meitei community often designate a poor and weak status to women. These negative traditional cultural views, norms and practices fortify negative perceptions about the female body that maintain patriarchal subordination of women and girls.

Eradicating sexist language is an important precondition to overcome sexism in society.

In this fast changing time, the ranking of women in general and that of the Meitei women in particular needs to be strengthened for the overall growth and development of the community.

The change in the mind-set of the women only cannot bring total change in their roles, status and identity unless their male counterparts are ready to accept their changing roles, status and identity.

This study will hopefully provide us to re-discover the path to liberating humanity from all kinds of exploitation and discrimination and also to promote the spirit of freedom, partnership and equal participation. This is the avenue for further research.

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