

## Courtship, Marriage, Consent and Violence against Women in the Meitei Society A Feminist Viewpoint

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**Abstract:** *The emotive vocabulary woven by the mothers of Meitei society in their voices against the state violence on the female body is substantially effective in highlighting the violence against women by the state forces. The other side of the story is the disturbing trend of the recurrent cases of violence against women particularly rape, betrayal and killing of young girls and women in Meitei society which are evident in the local dailies and reports on crime against women. The paper seeks to nuance the expressions of violence against women in the tradition of “koiba” and “chenba” by employing the Bourdieusian concept of habitus and feminist criticism on its limits.*

**Key Terms:** *Violence against Women | Status of Women | Love, Courtship & Marriage | Meitei Society | Feminist*

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### Introduction

The augury of love and marriages are progressively interwoven and embedded in the customs and traditions in every society. The socio-religious sanctions determine the nature, pattern and customs of courtship, marriages and various other rituals that bring the prospective individuals in a consistent long term bonding through wedding. In the context of the Meitei society, besides arranged marriage, the practice of love marriage is widely acknowledged, and has socio-cultural and religious sanctions. According to Devi (2016), the forms of marriages may be broadly grouped as marriage by – *hainaba*<sup>1</sup> or engagement, *chenba*<sup>2</sup> or elopement, *faba*<sup>3</sup> or capture, *keinyakatpa*<sup>4</sup>, *loukhatpa*<sup>5</sup> and court marriage. The various socio-cultural and religious events -the *umanglaiharaouba*<sup>6</sup>, *kangchingba*<sup>7</sup>, *youshang*<sup>8</sup>, *chairaoubachingkaba*<sup>9</sup>, *thabalchongba*<sup>10</sup>, *likonsanaba*<sup>11</sup> (earlier times) and so on provide the space to young people that prospects *koiba*<sup>12</sup> or *koinaba* or courtship. The notion of right to make choices of life partners through *koiba* is a common ingredient in the lives of the Meitei youth irrespective of gender. In addition to the sanctions of socio-cultural and religious rituals, the increasing number of young people moving out in the public spaces for education, employment and various other aspects of everyday life also add up to the practice of *koiba* in present day.

In recent times in the plain areas of Manipur, the recurrent cases of violence against women particularly rape, betrayal and killing of young girls especially in the Meiteis are happening which are clearly evident in the

reports of the local dailies. Here it is important to clarify that the confrontational view of whether violence and crime against women has increased or the reported cases has increased; the statistical aspect of the occurrence is not the focus of the paper. However it is important to emphasize the reported incidents of violence and crime against women in the local dailies to build the argument. In most of these cases persons involved in these heinous crimes are known to the victims and who claim to be in love. Now the contentious viewpoint that transpires in the daily conversations, with the frequent instances and reports of these forms of violence against women, is the questioning of the pros and cons of love marriages and *koiba*. These forms of exchanges and dialogues at the local context brew grounds for the generation of a public emotion that questions the *koinaba* and love marriages, but are blind to the expressions of the patriarchy visible in these events. As an insider I can sense the mood of the public emotion seemingly critical on the notion and practice of *koiba*, *chenba* and the right to make a choice of life partners. This paradoxical position limits the space of the youth and triggers the need to seek the women's question. In this design of the public emotions, one finds the expressions of patriarchy in the homilies of the everyday life in the Meitei society. This paper seeks to conceptualize the evident differential rules of engagement by the civil societies including the local dailies on the issue of violence against women employing Bourdieu's concept of habitus to nuance the understanding of the expressions of patriarchy and gender in the Meitei society from a feminist perspective.

## Love, Consent and Marriage

On the question of “What is love?” sociologists have competing viewpoints. The usual riled answer that ‘one just knows when one is in love’ is reflected in the sociological literature on the question. Yet the complementary forms that attempt to pin down the emotional and behavioral states add up to the concept of romantic love. According to Owens (2006), love scholarship can be roughly divided into two philosophical camps firstly that which argues love must have certain components to be genuine and needs to be differentiated from mere liking or lust. Second viewpoint suggests that love is a publicly informed but privately experienced state or to say whatever the person “in love” believes it to be.

Lee (1973) identified typology of ‘love style’ in six basic types of love experiences – *eros*, *ludus* and *storge* as the primary styles and the secondary style of *mania*, *pragma* and *agape*. The styles reflect the different beliefs regarding love and loving behaviours as well as personal preferences and comfort levels. *Eros* style tend to value sexual and sensual contact with the beloved; tend to be drawn to become sexual fairly quickly in a relationship; to define the experience of love quite quickly and to feel that the experience of the relationship is of great importance. Except the *mania* love style which tends to fit the negative stereotypes of obsessed love, the rest of the love styles do not fit the usual mold of romantic love as presented in novels and film. *Ludus*-style lovers are most interested in the conquest possible when chasing a potential partner; love is rather a game of strategy. Sexual contact may be more likely to have an aspect of accomplishment and play in these pairings. The *storge*-style lovers focus on comfort and emotional closeness in a relationship; love is generally not very physical and passion is not of utmost importance and lovers seem to be more like close friends but not to say deep friendship is the basis of this form of love. *Pragma* style of lovers are practical and stress on what the potential partner brings to the bargaining table; they are rather seeking to make the best deal for future life circumstances as possible. The last style in Lee’s typology, *agape*, is considered the ideal type; very rare romantic love; a love that is selfless and based on an almost spiritual desire for the other’s good. However, these styles of love fit widespread cultural definitions of how love develops and progresses and is contextual. In the legends of the Meiteis, one may find few of these love styles as discussed above.

Some of the mythological tales of the Meiteis like Khamba Thoibi, Naoting Khong, Panthoibi Nongpokningthou, Pitangnga, Nura Shanthalembi are some of the mentionable romance sagas in the history of the Meiteis. *Koibaor* courtship as a practice of wooing has been in vogue amongst the Meiteis since ancient times. A young man with his friends, one or two, would

visit the residence of the girl a little later after sunset where the girls would offer tobacco to the man and his friends. The tobacco pipe is made of banana leaf. If the girl is in love with the suitor, she would offer a long tobacco pipe otherwise she would offer a short tobacco pipe. The *koiba* would then lead to marriage either *Hainabaor Chenba* if the negotiation of the engagementbotched. In present times, *koiba* as a practice finds expressions in different forms that usurps the suitors’ desired markings either symbolic or material. As an insider, one finds the notion of *nungshinaba*<sup>13</sup> (being in love) in the everyday life of the Meiteis as something more than just liking or a casual affair. *Nungshinaba* connotes long term commitment. In the course of time, we also witness courting being moved from home environment of family and culture to the paid arena of dating sites such as restaurants, movies and clubs. The shift of the courting sites has led to the tremendous change in the nature and practice of *koiba*.

In certain situations, after *chenba* if any kind of resentment arises on the part of the groom then his family has to pay an amount which is called as *Izzat Dhaba Tanba*<sup>14</sup>, if the resentment is by the bride then her family has to pay to the groom. In this manner the scope of the marriage is dissolved. In present times, one witnesses the increasing practice of paying ransom where often marriages are avoided and dissolved by paying ransom to the girls’ family. As an insider, one feels the slackening of the essence of the practice *Izzat Dhaba Tanba* and often reducing it to something like a price of an object. This kind of a context and commonplace conception disgrace the status of women in the larger societal connotation and psyche.

The literary chronicles record the practice of *faba* or capture. In ancient times, the kingdom of Manipur constantly faced internecine feuds or warfare amongst the communities. It was the order of those days. Marriages of women captured in war, by the captors was a normal mode of obtaining wife. In this case marriages happen against the will of the women. Here the marriage is indeed a forced consent where the women concede out of fear or helplessness or the socially reproduce internalized notion of *chenba* to be synonymous to marriage even if it is against her will. The normalization of the forced consent is embedded in the social and cultural psyche of the Meiteis. The menfolk usually contemplate that after *faba* and elopement, the woman bears a marker of that of *chelurabi*<sup>15</sup> in the society and consequently she would accede without questioning. She then faces the brunt and gradually subsides in the rhythm of *chatnabi*<sup>16</sup>, where she begins to be submissive of whatever happens on her body. According to the *chantnabi*, she begins to take her roles and responsibilities as wife, new daughter-in-law, and sister-in-law as prescribed in the customs and traditions of everyday life where her life is epitomized in the spell of

beauty and the qualities of *maouanoubi*<sup>17</sup> (new daughter-in-law).

Here one may engage with Bourdieu's concept of habitus as the 'socialized subjectivity' – a way of theorizing the self which is socially produced. It is a way of analyzing not only how social relations become constituted within the self, but also how the self is constitutive of the social relations. Johnson (1993) has described it as a 'second sense', 'practical sense' or 'second nature' that equips social actors with a practical know-how. Habitus is thus manifested in styles of standing, moving, taking up space, in ways of speaking – idioms an accent, in style of dress and so on (Bourdieu 1986, 1990). In the case of the woman who has been captured (*faba*) and married, one sees the habitus not just confined in the body but also in the series of disposition, attitude and taste. Even if she wishes to resist the forced consent, the *chatnabi* most likely would ridicule her leaving with the option of either to continue with the forced marriage or to lead the rest of her life as the other.

Again *Keinya Katpa* is another form of simple marriage ceremony where the father or the parent of the woman gives her hand after elopement. The ceremony is celebrated by the exchange of garlands between the bride and the groom accompanied with the recitation of hymns by the priest. However, over a decade or so, one often finds the instances of *Keinya Katpain* cases where the *Meira Paibis*<sup>18</sup>/*Imas* (mothers) of the locality expose the consensual acts between adults and colour it as forceful acts. As Soibam (2012) rightly pointed out, that there is no distinction in the language between words used for consensual sexual act and forced ones nor is there any distinction between treatment of either. Citing moral grounds and claim of such an act as alien to the *chatnabi*, the local mob and the mothers decide the fate of these adults. This non-distinction between a consensual relationship and forced consent or forced relationship is problematic.

Indeed the socio-cultural sanction of *Koiba*, *Chenba* and marriage, in a unique way implies the freedom of choices a Meitei youth can make. Undeniably, this kind of practice substantiates in many ways the wellbeing of the youth and thus probably has a functional role in the society. However with the gradual change of the social tenets in recent times, and the change in nature of courting due to the shift of site of dating as discussed above, has seemingly opened up potential acts of violence against women. Moreover, another issue is the elopement of young boys and girls below the age of 18 years. These are some serious issues that the civil societies of the community need to ponder. However the scheme to make outlandish the practice of *koiba*, *chenba* and love marriages and portraying them as the reason for crime and violence against women as commented in local dailies and online news, for instance, as reflected in

an article posted by Kshetri (2013), and propagating for arranged marriage is rather contentious. It is rather an act of misrepresenting the issue at hand, because instead of questioning the patriarchy expressed in the forced consent and violence against women, one tries to construct a convenient narrative of sully the space that is available to the youth and the freedom of matchmaking. One also notices the differential rules of engagement in highlighting the violence when it comes to the *who* (the identity – whether personnel of state forces or individuals of the community or any other), the actor of committing the rape and the violence against women. The press coverage of these different loci of the same violence also alters. Identities, unlike class are not reflection of objective social positions. It is continually in the process of being re-produced as responses to social positions, through access to representational system and in the conversion of forms of capital (Skeggs, 1997). The variation in the rules of engagement and representation of the protest for the same act of violence gives inkling to enquire.

### **Concept of Habitus and Understanding of Violence against Women in Meitei Society**

One may find the phenomena experienced by the Meitei women after *chenba* or *faba*, useful to understand the conceptualization of Bourdieu's habitus. As discussed above the habitus as socialized subjectivity, the concept, as pointed out by Lawler, cuts across conventional - mind / body split, distinction between conscious and unconscious; much of its force derives from the non-conscious elements.

... [The body] does not represent what it performs, it does not memorize the past, it *enacts* the past, bringing it back to life. What is 'learned by the body' is not something one has, like knowledge that can be brandished, but something that one is (Bourdieu, 1990, italicized emphasis in original).

As indicated in the above quotation, habitus carries the concept of history – both personal history and social or collective history. He defines habitus as embodied history, internalized as a second nature and so forgotten as history. For Bourdieu, 'the subject is not the instantaneous *ego* of a sort of singular *cogito*, but the individual trace of an entire collective history' (Bourdieu, 1990). Drawing this concept, one may implicitly nuance the way in which the normalization of the submission against the consent of the women to concede in the marriage during *faba* takes place. This act is conveniently conflated with the idea of upholding the *chatnabi*. The series of these singular episodes of the remorse and pain - physical and psychological for going against her will and consent are concealed and normalized in the name of *chatnabi* or traditions and in the characterization of what a new daughter-in-law should be like – this arrangement is further culturally

reproduced.

Thus it is important to note that the habitus is not determining, but generative (Lawler, 2004). It is to say that the social world is dynamic; more or less identical habitus can generate different outcomes. So what is important is the relationality of habitus; it makes sense only in the specific local context and exists in relation to each other. Our social world is organised as class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and so on. All these are marked within the habitus. These social distinctions are hierarchal, so is the worth of the habitus not the same – some are normalized and others pathological and in this sense habitus clash like the class. In the pathological sense, habitus entails a judgment of other habitus. Clearly in our social world, only some have the authority to make such judgments stick. So what gives habitus its particular force is that power is conceptualized as working such that it is not what you do or what you have, that is marked as wrong or right, normal or pathological, but *who you are*. Here Lawler is not completely denying that subjects can resist such positioning. But it is important to note that by virtue of their habitus, some people are able to pass judgment implicitly or explicitly, on others, and to make it count. Thus differences between habitus, then, come to be made into inequalities.

...differences, a distinctive property...only becomes a visible, perceptible, non-different, socially *pertinent* difference if it is perceived by someone who is capable of *making the distinction...* (Bourdieu, 1998, italicized emphasis in original)

Habitus is thus an important means through which the social inequalities such as class, gender, ethnicity are made real and also made to inhere within the person, so that persons themselves who can be made to bear the hidden injuries of inequality. Further Lawler pointed out, Bourdieu's attempt to cut through antinomies such as self/other, structure/agency gives us a method in which inequalities can circulate culturally, as well as materially. Another point Bourdieu highlighted is of the ultimately arbitrary character of social distinction. For instance as Lawler (2004) explains what counts as 'tasteful' is an effect, not an intrinsic property, but of social relations – this gives us a way to challenge the taken-for-granted, 'the doxic' in Bourdieu's term.

Going back to the issue at hand, the violence against women perpetrated by the state forces is very serious and equally severe is the violence that women face in the private affairs (in this case *koiba* and *chenba*). We cannot be vocal for one form and remain onlooker for the other form of violence. The antinomy of the seen/unseen or represented/underrepresented violence in this case, takes the doxic state rather than being

questioned. The press representation and protest carried out especially by the *Meira Paibis* and the larger public in general on the two sets of violence has different rules of engagement. Certainly, as an insider what I am concerned about, is of the nature of the engagement of civil societies on the violence perpetrated by the state forces and on the one in private sphere. I am not saying that violence in the private affairs is not condemned at all, but one can sense that there is great deal of misrecognition on the public engagement and discourses of violence in private affairs. These different rules of engagement insinuate questions as to whether the space and the motor to protest this violence perpetrated by the state forces is endowed with certain perception and taste of certain political forces or otherwise. I would like to highlight Bourdieu's (1990) point that the motivation resides neither in the material or symbolic purpose of action, it resides in the relation between the habitus and the field (specific local context), which means that the habitus contributes to determining what determines it. It thus reiterates the point which is discussed above- the significance of *who you are* is what gives habitus its particular force.

### Conclusion

In the broader context of understanding gender and the Northeast, feminist writers from the region like Tellis (2012), Brara (2011), Soibam (2012) et.al have in different ways examined how the narratives of higher status of women as compared to mainland Indian women is constructed in the different literature.

Among the various pieties of the literature coming out of the region on gender are the assertions that tribal women's status is better than that of mainland Indian women; that there are matrilineal tribes like the Khasis or all-women markets in Manipur, which shows that women are in power; that these societies are based on traditional roles and division of labour which are then placed in an atemporal realm. This language is internalized by scholars from the region who have not examined the creators of these ideas or their assumptions and are repeated in present (Tellis, 2012).

Coming again to the nature of the resistance against the violence of women in the press representation or in the public spaces - the construction of the spontaneous rage, emphasize on the violence against women by the state actors, scholars epitomizing the tradition of women's power; all these attempts seems to appear like a pattern that has emerged for conflating a solidarity outside the identity of the women. On examining the account of Tellis and other feminist scholars of the region, it is worth to draw the argument of Pamela Fox (1994) that only some forms of contestation get to count as 'resistance'; and what gets to count as resistance tends to be what is approved by the bourgeois observer.

For Bourdieu, it is the logic of domination that makes submission and resistance interlinked in a paradoxical relation – *Resistance may be alienating and submission may be liberating. Such is the paradox of the dominated, and there is no way out of it* (Bourdieu, 1990). There are criticisms on this characteristically bleak and pessimistic passage, which Harkeret. al. (1990) reiterates as confirming Bourdieu's determinism and that his work robs us of political imagination and vision. Against Bourdieu, Judith Butler would claim that markers of domination can be resignified and this resignification can be the motor of social change.

... the expropriability of the dominant 'authorized' discourse that constitutes one potential site of its subversive resignification. What happens, for instance, when those who have been denied the social power to claim 'freedom' or 'democracy' appropriate those terms from the dominant discourse and rework or resignify those highly cathected terms to rally a political movement? (Butler, 1997).

Butler's (1997) argument thus analytically detaches linguistic authority from social authority to the extent that those not socially 'authorized to speak' are still able to 'speak with authority'. So for Butler, this linguistic seizing of authority can effect social changes, to the extent that they can overturn existing authority. Taking a different stand with Butler, Lawler (2004) pointed out that if authority is instantiated in the habitus, then the gap between the 'speaking with authority' and being 'authorized to speak', which Butler wants to introduce is not clear. As speech goes on between the speaker and the listener, the authority either inheres or fails to inhere in this relationship. Authority thus cannot be claimed by the speaker, it must be granted by the listener. It therefore is not a question of individual choice, but of doxic rules, there must be sufficient legitimation granted to the speaker (Lawler, 2004).

The emotive vocabulary of the *Meira Paibis* or the *Apunba Lup* who stripped themselves before the army headquarters in Imphal or the figure of Irom Sharmila (before she joins electoral politics) representing a certain kind of resistance speaks loud and the listeners reproduce it creating a lateral impact. While on the other side, the forms of resistance and protest against violence in private affairs which are equally horrific like the former stand nowhere in the amnesiac mind of the civil societies and Meitei community in general. This implicitly explains what kinds of protests are seen to be legitimate actors in the field of political protest – the differential rules of engagement for similar nature of violence against women, perpetrated by the state forces and violence in private spaces. In these expressions in the public spaces, for instance, the engagement by the

civil societies including the local dailies, one finds how the Meitei patriarchy disappears from view and the public psyche, though it may exist like sleeping partners in an enterprise. Therefore it needs to be asked how far the resignification is possible when the constituents of the habitus - the cultural, political and the theoretical representations are negative and the voice who questions the oppressive elements of the *chatnabi* are considered as anti-Meitei, anti-tradition, and remarked as pathological.

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<sup>1</sup>Hainaba – Marriage by engagement. It is considered to be purest and highest form of marriage practice in the Meitei society.

<sup>2</sup>Chenba – Marriage by elopement. It is union between a desiring woman and a desiring man which may be consummated (not necessarily always) without prior nuptial rights.

<sup>3</sup>Faba – Marriage by capture. It is also widely practiced where in most cases the woman is captured by the man against her will. Its practice has history in the early days when the internecine warfare was the order of the day. The practice continues even in present times.

<sup>4</sup>Keinyakatpa – It is a simple marriage ceremony where the father or the parent of the woman gives her hand after elopement and is celebrated by the exchange of garlands between the bride and the groom accompanied with the recitation of hymns by the priest

<sup>5</sup>Loukhatpa – It is simple recognition ceremony of the unsolemnised union of the husband and the wife. It happens when the parents of the woman wish to recognize the union. Without this ceremony the bride is excommunicated by her parents and in certain instances people refuses to take food made by her if the marriage is not acknowledged by the parents.

<sup>6</sup>Umanglaiharaouba – It is an important festival of Manipur celebrated to revere the local deities. It depicts the theories of evolution and creation of life; social, cultural, political and religious aspects of the Manipuris; natural, environment and physical sciences; health, medicine and sports of the indigenous people; literature, dance and music; rites and rituals associated with the Manipuris. It is marked by songs and dance performances.

<sup>7</sup>Kang chingba – It is celebrated for eight days with the same fervor as the Jagannath Rath Yatra of Orissa. The chariots of Lord Jagannath, His brother Balaram and sister Subhadra are pulled by thousands of devotees. In the procession people offer flowers, fruits and sweets to the deities. People sing sankirtans followed by dance.

<sup>8</sup>Youshang – One of the main festivals celebrated for five days which commences on the full moon day during the month of February or March. People perform a folk dance known as Thabal Chongba. Women go from door to door and collect donation for various religious activities. It is celebrated with similar fervor as Holi in mainland India.

<sup>9</sup>Chairaoubachingkaba – It is the new year of the Meiteis which is celebrated on the first day of the Meitei calendar month Sajibu which falls somewhere in the month of March – April. During the festival, people dress up in traditional attire, decorate their houses, prepare delicacies and offer it to the deity Sanamahi. An important ritual of this festival is that people climb the Cheiraiching hill top which is located in Imphal with the belief that one can scale great heights in life. People living in other towns climb the nearby hill. The married women visit her maiden house and wish her parents, brothers, sister-in-laws and the extended relatives greetings for the New Year.

<sup>10</sup>Thabalchongba – This is a folkdance organised mainly by the womenfolk of the locality. It is held in the evening and goes till late night. This dance is generally organised during the festivals like

Youshang, Chairaouba and Lai Haraouba.

<sup>11</sup>Likonsanaba – It is a kind of game of the dice played by the bachelors and maidens at night which goes on till dawn. One of the rules of the game is winners asks the one who loses in a dice match of Likon to dance or act.

<sup>12</sup>Koiba or Koinaba – It is a way of courting practice by the youth of the Meiteis. This practice of wooing has been in vogue amongst the community since ancient times. A young man with his friends, one or two, would visit the residence of the girl a little later after sunset where the girls would offer tobacco to the man and his friends.

<sup>13</sup>Nungshinaba – It is word of the Meitei language which means being in love. It connotes long term commitment not just liking or a casual affair in the western context. It normally leads to marriage of the partners.

<sup>14</sup>Izzat Dhab Tanba – This is a practice amongst the Meiteis where either the would-be-bride or the would-be-groom can demand an amount of ransom when one of the party proposes dissolving the marriage after elopement and before the nuptial ceremony.

<sup>15</sup>Chelurabi – It is a status given to a woman who has after eloping not got married either by choice or discarding of the relationship by her partner. Often she is gazed as the other in the community.

<sup>16</sup>Chatnabi – It is a word of the Meitei language which means customs and traditions.

<sup>17</sup>Maouanoubi – This word means new daughter-in-law in a family. It provides a sense of elegance that she is expected to perform along with series of rituals, responsibilities and a sense of submissive qualities in her everyday life – talking, walking, cooking and so on.

<sup>18</sup>MeiraPaibis – It is an informal form of organizing the local mothers especially for the protection of the youth from indulging in drugs, drinking and other unwanted behaviours. Later it also included the protection of the youth especially the male from the atrocities of the state forces. It is seen in every locality amongst the Meiteis. They are also popularly known as the women torch bearer as they move around at night with burning flames of torch.

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