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Proverbial Rhetoric in Sustenance of Gender Stereotypes: An Ethnological Account of Proverbs from Pakistani Languages

Abstract:

Language is the most effective tool of communication across cultures. Proverbs are one such component of stylistic poetic and rhetoric devices which serves to communicate the worldview of an ethnic group. The paper is an analysis of ways in which gender differences are perceived, symbolized, portrayed, expressed and promoted rhetorically through the use of proverbs amongst various ethnic groups in Pakistan such as Pashto, Saraiki, Urdu and Sindhi consistent with the Whorfian hypothesis of linguistic determinism and relativism. The study employs qualitative data using the descriptive methodology. Discourse analysis of the secondary data and participant observations cast as primary methodological approaches has been gauged to decipher the meanings and intent of the proverbs. The study findings suggest that meanings of proverbs and messages are context-bound and reflect power dynamics rooted in conventional gender roles which serve to construct and deconstruct the notion of 'womanhood' in the ethnicities mentioned above.

Key Words:

Cross-Cultural, Gender, Linguistic Determinism, Proverbs, Proverbial Rhetoric, Rhetoric, Woman Hood

Introduction

Proverbs are condensed and précised sayings that are frequently used to express general truths or practical precepts ([Rasul, 2015](#)). They refer to a short, generally known sentence of the folk that carries truth, wisdom, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical form that is fixed and memorable and transferred from one generation to the other (Medier, 2004). These are the popular sayings generally grounded in advice and state a commonly accepted truth because proverbs have been originated from cultural traditions, and they change from generation to generation. Sometimes their meanings are no longer relevant. "Folk wisdom" is rooted in proverbs. They reflect upon the cultural values and physical environment.

Proverbial rhetoric carries an innate lesson or advice and are often instructive, which supports the arguments. They are often used metaphorically in grammatical and literary devices, e.g. repetition, alliteration and rhyme. The proverbs are a reflection of folk wisdom which can serve as a source to understand the history, culture, custom and geography of a region. These are brief popular words with persuasive meanings. By using various meanings, rhetoric is thoughtfully expressed, such as the use of similes, metaphors, metonymy, personification and anti-thesis ([Tina, 2011](#)). These elements in proverbs serve as rhetorical devices. Literary texts use proverbs in ways due to which we can today consider proverbs in important as one of the other rhetorical elements such as simile, metaphor, allegory, and so on ([Rezaei, 2012](#)). [Schipper \(2004\)](#) suggests that proverbial messages are an excellent yardstick for finding out the extent to which people continue to accept sexist ideas about women ([Schipper, 2004](#)). The rhetorical discourse in folklife and the oral tradition of proverbs serve in sustaining

the gender-biased ideas through speech since the cultural requirement of fine rhetorical style applies to all public speaking ([Ethel, 1964](#)). This not only defines the ideal cultural roles prescribed to each gender, but also serves in adherence to those ideals.

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Cultural Knowledge is the key to unveil the underlying proverbial messages. Proverbs are very closely associated with or rather rooted in cultures. Therefore, one cannot understand proverbs without cultural Knowledge. Proverbial phrases have always been part of one's heritage irrespective of the territorial boundary. Every culture develops a variety of proverbs to reinforce wisdom and truth. One of the most significant indicators of cultures is language. Language is the most common mean of communication. When we acquire language, we acquire ways of thinking, because language is rooted in culture. The language provides us with a certain worldview which is often accompanied by similes, metaphors and proverbs.

Gender, as a concept, is constructed by every socializing agent and force in society: parents, teachers, the media, religion, and so on. The feminist perspective on gender encodes inequality. However, there is little physical or psychological evidence to justify gender stereotypes as reflecting clear distinctions between the sexes. Most of the existing differences are not the cause, but the result of gender roles ([Basow, 1992](#)). Most proverbs are moralistic and touch all aspects of life and activities. However, the study is solely aimed at understanding how gender differences are maintained cross-culturally through proverbial means. Proverbs related to women are either sexist in nature, portray women as an object of sexual gratification, describe the beauty of women or reflect women being unintelligent, talkative, and untrustworthy and degraded. This study is based on developing an understanding of gender differences in proverbs of Pakistani context. Some of the proverbs are selected from previously published books, and some are native speakers of Saraiki, Sindhi, Urdu and Pashtun languages.

Literature Review

A major difficulty in studying proverbs and metaphors i.e. language and figurative thought from an interdisciplinary perspective which the scholars and researchers can misunderstand through the methods, goals and terminology used in academic fields, different from their own (Gibbs, Colston and Johnson, 1996). Language is the most pertinent tool of communication in human societies. However, what we communicate is also dependent upon how we communicate it. The beauty of proverbs often lies with the poetics involved. They also make sense to the people where they are spoken since they can relate to the proverbs. They understand the context behind those proverbs.

Sapir Whorf hypothesis is best suited in this case. His idea of linguistic determinism suggests that language determines thought. Also, the idea of linguistic relativity which maintains that language influences the ways in which people perceive the world around them and the way they interpret the social realities ([Dickson & Mbosowo, 2014](#); [Eka, 2008](#)). Studies in the domain of gender and language demonstrate that language serves to be a critical vehicle in addressing the issues of gender construction and deconstruction ([Baxtar, 2003](#); [Sunderland, 2004](#); [Cameroon, 2005](#); [Lazar, 2005](#) & [Mills, 2008](#)). The nexus between gender, language and culture is reflected through the proverbial ethnological account of dominant Pakistani languages. The traditional and cultural representation of women through a communal expression is reflected through these witty proverbs.

The term gender has been brought into the contemporary use by a feminist anthropologist, Gayle Rubin, as a socially imposed division of the sexes or as an intentional transformation of females and males into women and men ([Cornwall & Lindisfarne, 1995](#)). The social construction of the notion of femininity and masculinity came to be known as 'gendered culture' ([Holmes, 1995](#)) which is central to the formation of the society ([James & Saville-Smith, 1989](#)). However, men and women are socially constructed, relational and culturally negotiated categories ([Jackson, 1993](#)). A study by [Kiyimba \(2001\)](#) maintains that oral literature is still a valuable medium of entertainment and social education, and recommends that the problem of gender stereotyping in it should be directly addressed through formal and informal education, to enable its consumers to resist its dichotomizing effect.

Despite modernization and social change with the passage of time, the gender ideology persists in having deep-rooted social support cross-cutting all socio-economic and cultural structures of the Pakistani society. In

parts of Bangladesh, India and Bangladesh prejudice against women and female children exist at all levels which are often highlighted in the proverbial speech ([Hussein, A cultural representation of women in the Oromo society, 2004](#)). It is argued in the study conducted by [Ethel M. Albert \(1964\)](#) that culture patterns speech behavior through rhetoric, logic and poetics; however, it can be the other way round as well since the argument of the paper is that proverbial rhetoric which is based on the intrinsic ethnic logic, poetics and rhetoric which serves in the sustenance of gender ideals and gender-based stratification persisting in any culture. The study is mainly concerned with the gender differences proverbs in the different Pakistani context. Aim of this study is to create an understanding of the role of proverbs in maintaining gender stratification through verbal rhetoric in everyday life.

When it comes to an ethnological account of proverbial phraseology, it is believed that proverbs are not only relics of the past, but equally have practical utility in everyday lives of Pakhtuns ([Badshah, 2017](#)). Studies on Pushto proverbs “*Rohi Mataloona*” have taken into account ([Ta’ir & Edwards, Rohi Matloona \(Pashto Proverbs\), 1982](#)) & ([Ta’ir, 2006](#)). Most proverbs are used as a social control mechanism to inculcate an ideal Pakhtun behavior and desirable moral values of the society by promoting differences among men and women. The proverbial messages are context-bound and reflect the perception of gender-based differences, symbolism and portrayal of both genders in Pashtun communities through proverbs ([Sanauddin, 2015](#)).

Sindhi proverbs are the result of an interaction of multicultural, geographical and religious factors ([Sahito, 2011](#)). They have evolved and based on three parameters of region, religion and register ([Doctor, 1985](#)). On a typological level, two types of narration can be differentiated based on its nature; Simple narration, which is linear in nature and has no deviations and embedded narration which found in Chinese tales “tale within the tale”. Many proverbs on gender differences among men and women are present in Urdu, which is defined in the proverbial language ([Siddiqui, 2014](#)). Punjabi proverbs are reflecting the socio-cultural picture of a society; this is a very important role of the folk-proverbs, which cannot be ignored ([Khan, Mustafa, & Ali, 2017](#)). Saraiki proverbs on different domains of life, especially gender differences, fruits, about women and men, bravery are known ([Mughal & Gillani](#)).

Research Methodology

Translation of proverbs has been difficult to some extent since it belongs to the genre of the traditional verbal folklore. A study on analysis of the translation methods to render minimum loss possible in the proverbs connotative meaning suggests literal, literary and substitution translation methods ([Al-Timen, 2015](#)). This study gauges literary translation methods. This section deals with the procedures gauged in drawing data through information and evidence or casting systematic observations as a part of the study. Qualitative data have been gathered for this paper, whereas the research methodology opted is descriptive. Descriptive research is also termed as case study research which is used to study a specific situation to see whether the existing theories are borne out of a specific situation ([Goddard & Melville, 2004](#)). It is used in this study to analyze the complex object of study; metaphors and how rhetorically they serve in presenting gender stereotypes roles. One of the major reasons for using a descriptive approach is to shed light on the poorly understood aspects of understanding and experiences on a phenomenon ([Matua & Van Der Wal, 2015](#)). Metaphors or proverbs can be considered as the linguistic objects which are symbolic and embedded in cultural connotations. The researchers have taken into consideration the case of ‘cultural proverbs’ from a wide variety of five major languages spoken in the country; Punjabi, Saraiki, Sindhi, Pashtun and Urdu to compare and contrast the general trends which emerge with reference to gender. Method of data collection was participant observation and discourse analysis. Secondary data was obtained through the internet, dictionaries, books and native speakers and primary data through participant observation.

Discourse analysis is out of one of the approaches to qualitative research. It is the study of naturally occurring language in any social context. Discourse analysis makes use of various qualitative methods to increase our understanding of human experience ([Shanthi, Wah and Lajium 2015](#)). Not only Cultural

anthropologists but also the linguistic anthropologists, are interested in recording and analyzing speech in a manner that it can be documented with innovation, transformation and replication of ideas gauged in cultural processes, however, they are not necessarily aware on making decisions or justifying them at different stages of data collection, analysis and processing. Linguistic anthropologists compare the units of discourse in a broader ethnographic project. Great strength lies in anthropological discourse analysis in ways where transcripts are related to what goes on outside, and the focus is on culture in discourse (Phillips, 2013). There are generally two concerns pertaining to discourse analysis: the kinds of meanings which are to be inferred from discourse data and attending to local understandings and meaning-making. While analyzing the proverbs from a local language, we try to address both.

The paper deals with ethnological account of metaphors used across dominant Pakistani languages. The construct of interest is principally qualitative in nature, dealing with a more holistic and in-depth description and analysis of the underlying messages in each metaphor. The metaphors are symbolic construction and interpretation of socio-cultural meanings (Altheide & Schneider, 2012). Identification of thematic patterns of the metaphors with similar themes is organized accordingly. For establishing the proverbs on gender differences Punjabi, Saraiki, Sindhi, Pashtun and Urdu native speakers, books and dictionaries are consulted. The data is presented thematically under the mentioned languages, which is analysed from an ethnographic lens.

Results and Discussion

Proverbs and folklore represent culture-specific social realities about people living in different societies, especially about what they think and behave. These traditional sayings help to understand and interpret all the norms, beliefs and values found in particular cultural context. Proverbs have always been popular across the nations due to their quality of carrying some important message, cautioning or a piece of advice. From the linguistic perspective, proverbs have contributed significantly in fostering everyday conversations, verbal interaction and folk learning. Language has an intrinsic connection with ethnic identity since it 'interweaves an individual's personal identity with his or her collective ethnic identity' (Liebkind, 1999). Keeping this in view, this paper attempts to analyze how women's position and their identity is constructed using proverbs from five selected regional languages to demonstrate how women are portrayed in different sections of the society.

This section of the paper describes how proverbs in different regional languages are used to define the role and place of women within the sub-cultures of Pakistani society that reinforces gender stereotypes. By analyzing proverbs from various languages spoken in Pakistan, dominant themes have been identified that generally highlight the stereotypical image of women as being inferior, resilient, talkative, envious, immature, quarrelsome and unintelligent.

Women's Dependence on Men

Studies on proverbs reveal that men, in general, have been depicted as more valued members, more powerful and authoritative and more precisely as "breadwinner". There are so many proverbs that compare men with women highlighting culturally prescribed gender roles and emphasizing women as subservient to men.

One of the Pushtu proverbs that depict women as dependent on men is "*che pa khawand drana ye, ppa tool kale daranu ye, owche pa khawand spakawe, pa tool kali spaka we*" (which literally means that a woman social status is relative to her husband's treatment of her). Another Punjabi proverb is "*Sae di man bhani, tay kani v rani*" (One who pleases her husband's heart, even the one-eyed woman is a queen). These kinds of proverb reinforce women subordinate position to men. They glorify the status of those wives who are accepted by their husbands. Attaining the approval and appreciation of the husband is considered the most important accomplishment for a wife. There is another Urdu proverb "*jo piya munn bhaye wohi suhagun*" and a punjabi proverb "*Oh! raaniyan jo khusman nu bhaniyan*" giving the same message that only those wives are treated as

queens who are closer to the hearts of their husbands and liked by them. These proverbs focus on the central ideology to prove women as being subservient and inferior to men.

Similarly, there are proverbs that influence not only our way of thinking but also our nature of relationship and pattern of interaction with each other. There are proverbs that advice men how to carry out their dealings with other women or more precisely with their wives. They are restricted to share any secret or confidential issue with women. One proverb, “*zanaani nu bhed na devo*” (Do not share a secret with women), reveals that women lack credibility and cannot maintain confidentiality which is generally considered a men’s trait. Wise men are also expected to avoid the company of women. There is a proverb “*Ranna wich be kay banda rann akhwa*” (means men in the company of women become womanish or unmanly).

Men are also advised not to consult their wives and involve them in the decision making process. The decision-making authority solely rests with the men. “*runna pichey lug kay banda khuaar he theenda ae*” (men who follow women ruin themselves). There are proverbs that indicate that men who cooperate with their wives and give weightage to their opinions get misdirected. These kinds of proverbs construct a negative image of those men who value their wives and listen to them. Unfortunately, in Pakistani society, due to these prevailing gender stereotypes, many women must face discrimination in all spheres of their lives. Women are not encouraged to participate in the decision making even with regards to matters concerning to them. It is disheartening to mention that men who pay heed to their wives or adore them are ridiculed and face criticism. They are generally labelled as ‘*runn mureed*’ (follower of women or henpecked husbands). A Punjabi proverb, “*Runn mureed da mun kaala*” indicates that men who dote on their wives blacken their faces. The above-mentioned proverbs reflect that the status and position of women in comparison to men is lower in society. It is considered socially undesirable and undignified for a man to be obedient and faithful towards their wives.

Women as Unintelligent Beings

Some of the old sayings and proverbs represent women as being unwise, irrational, and unintelligent. An example of such kind of proverbs is “*Runnan de mutt khurri picchay*” (In the nape, rests women’s wits). This proverb dents the rationality of women. Similarly, there are other Pushtu proverbs such as “*cheaurata we, galata we*” (If she is women, she is wrong), and “*Cheghwagh o jale la zikhdra ye machane la ze*” (When it is time to milk the cow, the disorganized woman starts grinding the grain). These proverbs depict women as being imprudent and unwise. They are considered to have less forethought and lack the competence to make rational decisions. This also shapes the mindset of women to regard men as wiser and having the natural potential to make visionary judgments. Through the enforcement of these proverbs, men accrue power and become more dominant in every sphere of life. Moreover, such proverbs through the transmission of oral traditions do have the potential to undervalue women to maintain unequal power relations and deprive them of taking up any leadership role. Proverbs such as these serve as a powerful tool for the consolidation of women’s lower position and lack of potential to make sound decisions as compared to their male counterparts.

Women as Argumentative and Confrontational

One of the most common characteristics attributed to women is their Involvement in quarrels and disputes. Many Pakistani proverbs do emphasize women as being quarrelsome and hostile. A Punjabi proverb “*Jithan da peer uthanda tri pheer napheer*” (Where a woman is present, everyone is fighting). Such proverbs strengthen the ideology that women are bone of contention and trouble-makers. Another proverb “*Runn de misaal eway jai do dhari talwaar*” (women are similar to a double-edged sword). This proverb by using the analogy of double-edged sword portrays women as being hazardous. Likewise, an Urdu proverb “*Oont ki pakar or aurat kay maker se Allah bachay*” (One cannot escape from a camel’s grip and a woman’s snare) portrays women as being shrewd and cunning. A Punjabi proverb stated as “*Aap na wassi sorey, loka matti de*” that can be translated as, that even a woman who cannot get along with her in-laws is advising others. In the traditional culture of Pakistan, an ideal woman is considered as the one who is well adjusted in her husband’s home. In

connection to this, another proverb that highlights the negative image of those women who have been divorced by their first husband is described as *“sidday rah nu jaiye bhawain howay door, chuttal run nu kaddi na karyo bhawain howey hoor.”* This proverb warns men not to marry a divorced woman no matter how pretty she is. This advice is based on the social expectation that good women always keep their marriages intact, and if a woman is divorced, that means she seriously lacks essential qualities and must not be considered again for marriage.

In many proverbs, women are labelled as being argumentative such as *“je runna de naal matha lawwo, te fair kunna di vi khair manaow”* (means that the one who gets into an argument with a woman has to listen a lot). Women are generally presumed to be more talkative than men. A Pushtu proverb illustrating the arguing nature of women explain it in this way *“Da duniya tolona ghat darogh da de che dree khzaghale nasty we”* (The biggest lie of the world is that three women were sitting quietly). Another well-known proverb is *“chup chupeeta puttara munda tee chutewai”* that can be translated as that a quiet son and chatty daughter is bad. Being ‘talkative’ is negatively represented as a shortcoming of women. Some of the proverbs portray women as a cause of dispute. An Urdu proverb explains as *“Jhagry ki hein batain teen, zan, zar or zameen”* (there are three sources of conflict, women, money and land).

Some of the proverbs portray women as ‘unreliable’ and deceitful. For example, a Pushtu proverb *“chekhaze ty halwy no dam ta ye wale nu waye”* means (When you tell your secret to a woman, why not tell it to a drummer). These kinds of proverbs represent women as not being trustworthy and dependable for sharing important and confidential information. In many proverbs’ women are emphasized to be more exaggerative. For example, *“pullay nai dhela te kerdi mela mela”* and *“ukhi dussay naa te naa noor parri”*. These proverbs describe that women overstate and gives an exaggerated and false impression of their status and beauty. Women are also depicted as intruders in many proverbs. An Urdu proverb is stated as *“Aayee bee aaqila, sub kamo mein dakhla”* (As a wise woman enters your house, she will start interfering in all matters). Another proverb emphasize this trait among women as *“aag lene aai or ghar wali ban bethi”* (She came to take fire and became the wife). Such proverbs build up a negative perception of women as unreliable whose actions may be detrimental for others.

Women are Appraised as “Mothers”

Several proverbs appreciate women and their childbearing capacity as the most desirable characteristics found in them. The love, care and affection of the mother is well acknowledged in a variety of proverbs. Woman in a mother’s role has always been appreciated as indicated in the following proverbs such as *“maawan than dyan chaawan te peo kikraan de kunday”* (Mothers are just like cold shades and fathers are like thorns of Acacias), *“maa ki dua jannat ki hawa”* (Mother’s prayers are wind from heaven), *“maa kay pero kay neechay jannat”* (Heaven lies under the feet of mother), *“maawa jannat da perchaawan”* (mothers are shadows of paradise). The examples of the above-quoted proverbs show that women as mothers are depicted positively and in a most dignified manner.

A woman as mothers are glorified in proverbs and due to the ability to procreate their position in the family is adored, and their overall social status is elevated. Mothers of sons are particularly more valued. *‘Putraan di maa rani’* (Mother of sons is like a queen). Bearing more sons empowers women and gives them greater authority and respect. *“Puttran di maa di tor hi wakheri hundi ae”* (mother of a son(s) has unique elegance). Sons are highly valued and preferred. *“puttar mithre meway”* (sons are (like) sweet fruits) and *“Puttar jamdiyan hi jawan honday”* (Sons are grown up since birth). Another Pushtu proverb states *“Chesoomra ye zaman we, domra qaderman we”* (the more sons, the more social status). Sons are cherished even if they are spoiled. *“Bigra beta or khota paisa bhi kbhi na kbhi kam a jata hay”* (even a spoil son and a false coin can work sometimes). In short, Mother’s love is portrayed as pure having no alternate. *“Mawan da haan patt, tay ballan da haan vat”* (The heart of a mother is silk, and the heart of children is as hard as a twisted rope).

Daughters, as compared to sons, are presented negatively in proverbs. An example of such representation is “*Tesra beta raj rajae, tesri beti bheek mangwae*” (The third son helps you rule, and the third daughter leads you to beg). A similar Punjabi proverb is “*tee osri te khaan peen wasriya*” that means when a daughter starts growing up her parents forget about their basic needs. Such proverbs embody daughters with tension and burden. Their birth of daughters increases the financial burden and brings poverty in the family. Daughters are perceived as guests and temporary residents of the family. A famous proverb is “*Dhee praya dhunn*” (daughter is a treasure that belongs to others), “*dheeyan jamdiyan paraiyan*” (Daughters are outsiders since birth). Daughters are associated with tension and insecurity. It is a commonly believed proverb “*dhiyaan tun ahi dhiyan de leykhan tu darr lagdaae*” (not daughters rather their destiny which makes (parents) feels afraid). Giving birth to children is considered women’s prime responsibility. Childlessness is perceived as a curse. A Punjabi proverb expresses it as “*phuddar maj qasiyan jogi*”. It is used to denote a barren woman who is unsuccessful in giving birth to any child. It conveys the meaning that a barren buffalo should be handed over to a butcher as she has no utility. Similarly, a sterile woman should be left as she has no utility if she cannot reproduce. In Pakistani culture, just like many other parents are supposed to arrange a timely marriage of their daughters. Once they are married, they are least welcomed at their natal house. “*Biyahi larki parosi dakhil*” (the parents’ house is portrayed as a foreign domain for a married woman).

Conclusion

The above analysis of the proverbs reveals how the negative representation of women creates their stereotypical social image in society. Proverbs undoubtedly serve as a strong mechanism to maintain and enforce gender bias and patriarchal values. Proverbs are a very significant part of indigenous culture and play an essential role in the perpetuation of gender inequities by undervaluing women’s position, their role and identity. Discourse analysis of the selected proverbs in this study illustrates how women are portrayed in a biased manner as weaker, irrational, dependent, disruptive and quarrelsome, etc. Women are only praised in the role of a mother for giving birth to children and particularly sons. At one level proverbs undermine women, and on the other level, they promote masculine superiority. Proverbs are widely believed as a truthful explanation based on experience and traditional wisdom and play a vital role in strengthening gender discrimination and subordination of women. The nexus between gender, language and culture is reflected through the proverbial ethnological account of dominant Pakistani languages. The traditional and cultural representation of women through a communal expression is reflected through these witty proverbs.

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