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A Cultural Review of Gender roles and Power Dynamics in Arabic Proverbs.

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Abstract

This review critically examines gender-specific roles and power dynamics embedded in Arabic proverbs, highlighting how these cultural artifacts reflect and reinforce societal ideologies. Through a review of prior studies conducted in various Arabic-speaking contexts—including Omani, Moroccan, Sudanese, Palestinian, Yamani, and Hijazi cultures—the study reveals recurring patterns of female subordination and male dominance. Using a feminist and critical discourse analysis (CDA) framework, the paper explores how linguistic devices such as metaphor, symbolism, and allusion are employed in Arabic proverbs to perpetuate gender stereotypes. While a few proverbs portray women positively, they often confine them to traditional roles such as mothers or caregivers, reinforcing patriarchal expectations. The analysis reveals objectification, denial of autonomy, and symbolic silencing of women through proverbial language. By identifying these patterns, the study underscores the role of proverbs in normalizing gender inequality and calls for a reassessment of their continued usage in modern discourse. This study aims to fill the gap in culturally specific analyses of gender representation in Arabic proverbial literature and highlights the need for discourse that promotes gender equity in Arab societies

Paper Info

1. Headline

Introduction

Online Oxford Dictionaries provides a definition of a proverb as “A short, well-known saying that conveys a universal truth or piece of advice,” while Collins English Dictionary describes it as “a concise and memorable saying that typically expresses a common fact or experience with vivid imagery.” The word “proverb” originates from Middle English, derived from Old French “proverb” and Latin “*proverbium*,” combining “*pro-*” meaning “*forth*” and “*verbum*” meaning “*word*.” Considering the cultural significance of proverbs, they can be understood as succinct expressions reflecting the collective wisdom, biases, and superstitions of humanity. The New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy characterizes proverbs as “concise sayings embodying accumulated human wisdom, biases, and superstitions.” The inclusion of ‘prejudices’ and ‘superstitions’ in this definition is particularly notable, indicating that proverbs often mirror societal beliefs and values (Rasul, 2015). However, drawing from various definitions of proverbs, one can identify key characteristics and shared traits. A significant common feature of proverbs is their oral origins. Stemming from oral tradition and often unwritten for centuries, proverbs are crafted in a manner that facilitates easy memorization by the common person. Remarkably, they have been passed down from generation to generation with minimal alterations, making them revered as repositories of collective wisdom. Proverbs commonly employ grammatical structures and rhetorical devices, such as alliteration, rhyme, repetition, and parallelism, enhancing their memorability and spanning cultures worldwide. While Islam, as argued by Hekmat (1997), acknowledges and protects women’s rights, proverbs within Islamic societies often paint a different picture. Hekmat’s work exemplifies this by highlighting proverbs with negative connotations towards women, suggesting a potential disconnect between religious ideals and social realities. These proverbs can perpetuate a narrative of degradation, mistreatment, and neglect.

Various scholars have proposed different definitions of proverbs, but a universally accepted definition remains elusive. In an attempt to offer a comprehensive definition, Mieder (2008) refers to a proverb as a folk-originated expression that conveys a basic truth in simple language, often enhanced by rhyme and alliteration. Proverbs are typically brief and may have both literal and figurative meanings. They are considered reputable and ancient, though verifying their age can be challenging when examining diverse literary sources. Exploring the association between gender, power, and proverbs reveals the essence of gender parity as the pursuit of equality between men and women, particularly in terms of rights and power dynamics. Definitions of proverbs are intricately linked to precision, rooted in human experiences, social observations, folklore, and general truths. Among these defining aspects, the concept of truthfulness stands out as particularly complex, as it reflects not absolute truth but rather societal interpretations of truth (Rasul, 2015). Proverbs across different languages demonstrate how values and beliefs are ingrained in linguistic expressions, encompassing popular sayings, shared language, oral customs, conversational norms, and even forms of linguistic ingenuity. These proverbs serve as reflections of societal attitudes towards gender. Examining the proverbs within a specific language or culture provides insight into the perceptions of gender within that society. For instance, a proverb from

Rajasthan suggests, “*If a girl is born, neglect her, for she will thrive like a cactus; if a boy is born, nurture him carefully, like a rose tree*” (Schipper, 2010).

Litratutture review

The exploration of proverbs has been a topic of interest for researchers because they offer a broad insight into life and act as indicators of traditional wisdom. Grzybek (1994) states that a definition that covers all elements of the proverbial genre is not universally agreed upon.

According to Dominguez (2010), oral traditions play a significant role in shaping the perceptions and sentiments of various communities. The use of proverbs within oral traditions offers insights into the differing or similar perspectives on women across societies. In numerous patriarchal cultures, women are expected to exhibit obedience towards the male members of their family, including their father, husband, brother, and son. This quality of submissiveness is highly esteemed in several African societies, where families aim to instill it in young girls in preparation for marriage. Women are required to obey their husbands and comply with their directives. The African proverb below highlights the importance placed on this submissiveness:

“Omukazibirengebyaddiba; bw’otabikunyatebigonda (A woman is likened to the extremities of a hide; they require rubbing to soften).”

Schipper (2010) highlights that proverbs typically draw upon fundamental human experiences and behaviors. The body is emphasized as a means through which individuals express their emotions and identities within the cultural framework they exist in, while also being influenced by societal expectations. Gender roles and the impact of patriarchy on identity are evident in proverbs such as the Dutch saying “*A good woman goes without head,*” suggesting that women are not expected to be rational or independent thinkers. Furthermore, Schipper (2010) points out the prevailing association of women with beauty and men with intelligence in proverbs from various languages and cultures. Proverbs like “*Women have only half a brain*” in Arabic, and “*Women are wacky, women are vain; they’d rather be pretty than have a good brain*” in English, USA, perpetuate the notion that women lack intelligence compared to men. This sentiment is echoed in Urdu proverbs as well, such as “*auratnaqis-ul-aqalhotihai*” which translates to “*A woman has flawed wisdom.*”

It is fascinating to observe that while the themes conveyed in proverbs worldwide are similar, it is the language choice, rhetorical devices, and use of imagery that differ between cultures. These linguistic variations have a significant impact, as language not only influences our understanding of reality but also intersects with power dynamics. Particularly in the realm of gender-related matters, the use of stereotypical language and the reliance on masculine terms have a detrimental effect on people’s psychology (Roya, 2011).

Ali Saud Ambu-Saidi (2012) investigated the presence of feminine markers within Omani proverbs, which include lexemes related to women and feminine onomastics used in negative proverbs. Through a qualitative analysis of Omani proverbs sourced from two books, she discovered that a significant portion of proverbs containing feminine references convey derogatory connotations that highlight women’s perceived inferiority. Ali Saud Ambu-Saidi also created a questionnaire using negative proverbs to learn more about how people understood them. She brought to light that young people’s attitude may undergo changes based on the way that they see different gender

perspective. Belfatimi (2013), on the other hand, focused on Moroccan proverbs to study how women are presented in them. She collected information from Moroccan Arabic books and online resources which deal with the issues related to women. Proverbs were then categorized into several sections based on various issues about “beginning from the home,” which, mainly, is a basic concept which further elucidates gender differences, and, each, according to the findings, had women to be relegated to secondary roles and gave men more importance in superior roles, such as leading and administering.

Mubarok (2017) established that relaxation of gender distinctions is essential in the prevention of the emergence of gender discrimination. Mubarok employed an FCDA approach in the study of the intersections among language, gender, and culture in investigating the traditional perspectives concerning the perception and placement of women in Sudanese culture.

Jendeya discussed female representation in Arabic proverbs, focusing on Sudanese, Palestinian, Omani, and Yamani communities, in the year 2023. For examining 106 Arabic proverbs from four cultures—Sudanese, Omani, Yamani, and Palestinians—a descriptive type of study design was implemented in the study. The study first looked at whether the proverbs consistently painted women as inferior. The main linguistic and pragmatic patterns and their associated implications were then highlighted through a linguistic analysis that focused on pragmatics and discourse analysis.

In order to identify prevailing patterns, the study also computed the frequencies of good and negative qualities. According to the review, most Arabic proverbs depict women as being less fortunate than males. The linguistic devices of lexemes, feminine anthroponyms, rhyming, and lexical coherence are most frequently used in these proverbs. More negative than favorable portrayals of women are found, with traits like being naive, spiteful, and rude beings being common. All things considered, the study shows how proverbs in traditional societies represent women’s subordinate position in relation to men.

Ghafoori and Elyas (2023) investigate how women are represented in Hijazi proverbs in Saudi Arabia. Twenty-five proverbs depicting women were chosen from various authentic Hijazi books, and a Feminist critical discourse analysis approach was utilized. Feminist Discourse Analysis (FDA) is a critical approach to studying language that seeks to uncover how gendered power relations are constructed, maintained, or challenged through discourse. Rooted in both feminist theory and critical discourse analysis, FDA focuses on the ways in which language reflects, reinforces, or subverts patriarchal ideologies and social inequalities. It pays particular attention to how women and marginalized gender identities are represented, whose voices are amplified or silenced, and how societal norms around femininity and masculinity are linguistically produced. Unlike traditional discourse analysis, FDA emphasizes the importance of context—historical, cultural, and social—in interpreting texts and spoken interactions. The analysis revealed that women were often shown in a negative light, portrayed as lacking intelligence, failures, incapable, poor decision-makers, biased, and as temptresses. However, some proverbs also praised women but confined them to traditional gender roles like mothers, wives, and daughters. The study suggests that certain Hijazi proverbs depicting women negatively should not be promoted, and it may be advisable to avoid using them in Hijazi society or in interactions with women.

Despite a growing body of research analyzing gender portrayal in proverbs from various languages and cultures (e.g., Ghafoori & Elyas , 2023; Karakacha et al., 2021; Rasul, 2015) research specifically focused on Arabic proverbs remains scarce. Those studies that have been carried out so far into Arabic proverbs come in two strands: those that have focused either on the historical or cultural allusions of the proverbs, and descriptive analyses engaged with the language features of the proverbs e.g., Altohami, 2023. However valuable in themselves, these two methods do not critically investigate the gender ideology and power dynamics underlying these proverbs.

This gap can be bridged by using critical discourse analysis. We can learn a great deal about the gendered ideology of Arabic proverbs from critical examination of norms and power dynamics in Arabic-speaking countries. While there are cross-cultural research studies on gender representation in proverbs (Rasul, 2015), more culturally specific analyses are necessary. That is attained by concentrating on Arabic proverbs that reflect a specific cultural setting.

Aim of study

With the above considerations in mind, this study aimed to examine gender-specific roles and power dynamic in Arabic proverbs and how these reflect societal perspectives.

Critical Analysis

Arabic proverbs use linguistic devices such as satire, metaphor, allusion, and symbolism to express gender ideologies. These rhetorical tools often serve to marginalize and stereotype women while reinforcing male dominance. Even proverbs that portray women positively do so by idealizing self-sacrifice, patience, and obedience—qualities that align with traditional gender roles,. Some proverbs relating to women were thus products of cultural religious and marriage-related social expectations. Although some proverbs exalt women, most emphasize the roles that women play in the household or in giving birth, and are somewhat stereotypical. To understand how such representations help us read constructions about gender and power relationships in Arab culture, we must first examine this representation and understand how women are depicted in Arabic proverbs. Here come some Arabic proverbs that are construed.

proverb (1)

“Al-zawaji sutra—marriage is a shield”

The proverb demonstrates how essential family and community harmony is in many Arab communities. Marriage is perceived as a tool for ensuring a happy family structure and adherence to societal norms.. The meaning varies depending on the cultural setting. The “shield” may mainly protect the husband in patriarchies, and he retains the control of the wife within his command and influence of her behavior and activities in the outside world. In other progressive understandings, the proverb may symbolize the mutual stability and protection that marriage offers to both partners.

proverb (2)

“Waladaka khairi wa bitaka ikhitariliha—let your son choose his bride; but choose a bridegroom for your daughter”

The proverb point out the choice of a daughter's marriage is sometimes thought of a guarantee of the family's success and inheritance, and sometimes, even the daughter's own preferences do not make up the variables. The proverb points out the unfairness of marriage decisions in a patriarchal society. Since boys appear to have more independence, they are generally allowed more latitude in choosing a partner. However, daughters are often "given away" in a marriage that is planned and consented to by the parents — the daughter does not have as much control in this very important area of her life.. The traditional system of gender that offers males more liberty and social status than females is evident in this saying. This illustrates how much family honor and status mattered, especially concerning a daughter's marriage. The saying may also be associated with arranged marriages dating from the past, where normal social status and economic terms of two families were more important than the individual's choice.

proverb (3)

"Al-rijaalu qabaayilu wal al-niswaani nifaayilu—men are with their tribes and women are with their good deeds"

The proverb suggests that the source of men's identity, authority, and status in society is their membership in tribes. The tribe is essential in Arab societies because it represents a collective identity and a support system. In contrast, the proverb suggests that the source of a woman's power or authority is attributed to her virtues and her individual accomplishments. In this regard, the proverb suggests the source of men's relevance and power in society is their membership in a tribe.. In this sense, women's power sourced from their virtues may represent a stereotype of cultural reality put on women as the custodians of moral virtues and the builders of networks of relations and peace within the domestic and social space.

proverb (4)

"Huratu swabarati baituhaa umarati—a virtuous woman had patience with her husband and her house flourished"

In a patriarchal society, this proverb supports the stereotypical gender role and expectations for women. It underlines that patience is a key attribute of a wife, meaning that a good woman's endurance and tolerance are required in a household. The evidence from various Arab cultures reveals that Arabic proverbs systematically contribute to the normalization of gender inequality. They objectify women, strip them of autonomy, and reduce their roles to those defined by patriarchal expectations. Despite the presence of a few neutral or positive proverbs, the overwhelming message is one of compliance and subordination. These linguistic patterns shape societal attitudes, contribute to gendered socialization, and perpetuate power imbalances.

proverb (5)

"Dharabatu al-intaya zai mash'ati aldinnaya—punishing a female is like rubbing butter over the body"

The message that is being conveyed is that women are not considered people that feel pain or individuals who cannot be reasoned with without undergoing punishment. There is a clear lack of empathy and understanding of a woman's predicament. The phrase supports the concept of male supremacy that they are greater than women and

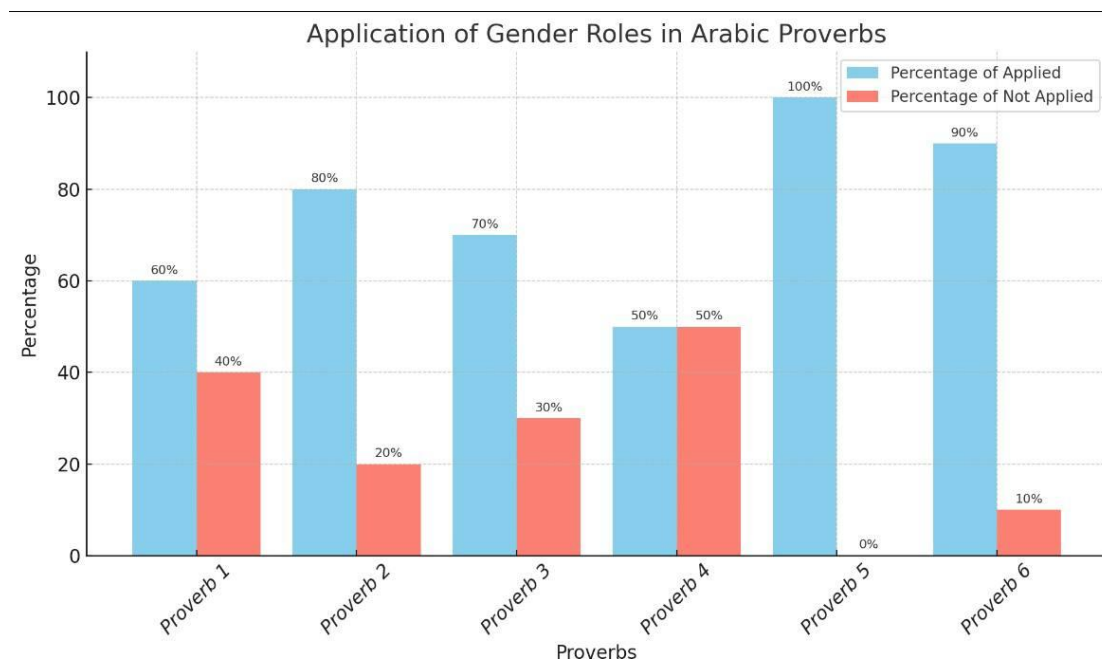
can discipline women without great consequences. It is believed that women should be under men, and men should be the makers of laws and impose discipline. The phrase can be related to historical perceptions of the power that women held, and thus, a direct relation of abuse cannot be discussed in public.

proverb(6)

“Mauti al-maratu tajidiidi al-urusi—the death of a wife is the renewal of the wedding”

This proverb, although simple, is strikingly likely to come from a culture where men held powerful positions. Her death becomes a time to find a new companion, just like one would be given a chance to find a new shoe to replace an old one. The proverb downplays the pain associated with dying but only surfaces the need to find a new wife, thus eroding the pain of a closely losing one’s lifetime companion. The proverb emphasizes the wants of the husband to find a new wife, unaccompanied by the questions of the departed spouse’s agency and mental health. This proverb highlights gender norms that privilege men’s greater authority on matters to do with marital affairs, such as the act of polygamy. Several spouses are seen to cater for the survival of the family line, which depicts cultural values with a focus on lineage and family inheritance. It also relates to earlier customs of arranged marriages where a woman was considered to fulfill specific responsibilities in the home.

Overall, these proverbs collectively illustrate how Arabic proverbial discourse contributes to the normalization of gender inequality. They objectify women, restrict their agency, and define their value in relation to men’s needs and societal expectations. Even when proverbs depict women positively, it is often within limiting and prescriptive roles. This linguistic framing shapes cultural attitudes, influences socialization, and perpetuates imbalanced power structures. A critical examination of such sayings is essential to understanding how language can both mirror and maintain oppressive gender ideologies.



Conclusion

The proverbs analyzed reveal deep-rooted gender norms and social expectations prevalent in many Arab cultures, reflecting both traditional values and patriarchal structures. This review demonstrates that Arabic proverbs function as cultural instruments for sustaining gendered power structures. Through metaphor and linguistic strategy, they reinforce patriarchal norms and restrict women's roles in both public and private spheres. Across the examples, marriage is portrayed not merely as a union of individuals, but as a strategic tool tied to family honor, lineage, and societal control. Men are granted authority, independence, and identity through tribal and familial connections, while women are often reduced to their roles as patient wives, virtuous caretakers, or objects of male control.

These sayings underscore how language can serve as a powerful vehicle for cultural values, reinforcing male dominance and female subordination. While some proverbs highlight virtues such as patience or moral integrity, they frequently frame these within restrictive gender roles that expect women to endure, obey, and adapt. Women's autonomy and emotional agency are largely absent, and even their suffering is minimized or normalized. Ultimately, these proverbs not only reflect societal attitudes but also shape and sustain them. By embedding gendered expectations into everyday language, they contribute to the ongoing normalization of inequality, leaving little room for progress unless critically examined and challenged. The review calls for a critical reassessment of the use of such proverbs in modern Arabic-speaking societies and encourages the inclusion of egalitarian discourse that empowers rather than silences women.

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Abstract in Arabic

تُقدم هذه المراجعة تحليلًا نقديًا للأدوار الجنسانية وبنى السلطة المتجذرة في الأمثال العربية، مبرزةً كيف تعكس هذه التعبيرات الثقافية وتُعزز الأيديولوجيات المجتمعية. ومن خلال مراجعة دراسات سابقة أُجريت في سياقات متعددة في العالم العربي – بما في ذلك الثقافات العُمانية، المغربية، السودانية، الفلسطينية، اليمنية، والحجازية – يكشف البحث عن أنماط متكررة من خضوع المرأة وهيمنة الرجل. وبالاعتماد على إطار تحليلي يجمع بين المنظور النسوي وتحليل الخطاب النقدي، يستعرض البحث كيف تُستخدم وسائل لغوية مثل الاستعارة، والرمزية، والتلميح في الأمثال العربية من أجل ترسيخ الصور النمطية الجنسانية. وعلى الرغم من وجود بعض الأمثال التي تُظهر المرأة بشكل إيجابي، إلا أنها غالبًا ما تُحصر في أدوار تقليدية مثل الأمومة أو الرعاية، مما يُعزز التوقعات الأبوية. ويكشف التحليل عن مظاهر تشييء المرأة، وإنكار استقلاليتها، وإسكانها

رمزيًا من خلال اللغة المثلية. ومن خلال تحديد هذه الأنماط، يؤكد البحث على دور الأمثال في تطبيع عدم المساواة الجندرية، ويدعو إلى إعادة النظر في استمرار استخدامها ضمن الخطاب المعاصر. كما يسعى هذا البحث إلى سدّ الفجوة في التحليلات الثقافية الخاصة بتمثيل النوع الاجتماعي في الأدب المثلي العربي، ويُبرز الحاجة إلى خطاب يعزز العدالة الجندرية في المجتمعات العربية.
