

Gendered Ideology and Proverbs: A Critical Social Analysis (CSA) of Urdu and English Proverbs

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ABSTRACT: Proverbs are considered a treasure house of wisdom and embody practical wisdom in them. Although they are most often culture-specific, they are an embodiment of practical wisdom accepted almost everywhere. They are the gems of wisdom in concise and precise form. The present study attempts to analyze the gendered proverbs collected from the Dictionary of Proverbs, both in English and Urdu. The Dictionary of Urdu Proverbs by Rehmat Aziz and the Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs by Jennifer are the data sources used in the study. The data used in the present study has been analyzed by employing Fairclough's (2015) model of Critical Social Analysis (CSA) and Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) by Lazar (2005). This integration has been done to locate gendered and Marxist perspectives embedded in the proverbs collected from English and Urdu sources. The levels of analysis include social and Marxist critique of language along with exploring power inequality embedded in the proverbs to represent Fe/male positively or otherwise. The findings of the study reveal that both men and women are rendered invisible at linguistic and social levels. This supports Fairclough's stance that language use is never neutral and the powerful group is most often represented in-group positively and vice versa. Besides, the study finds that most often women are represented as marginalized, silenced, and as a commodity. It contends that the concept of power politics is mostly played up through proverbs. It is also observed that proverbs mirror social reality prevailing in a particular context.

KEYWORDS: Critical Social Analysis, Cultural Artifacts, Feminist CDA, Gendered Ideology, Patriarchal Ideology, Proverbs

Introduction

Mieder (2004) argues that proverbs are the artifacts of cultural values and define our perception of cultural values in a particular context. They are significant in determining our attitudes to gender, authority, morality, and social order and are frequently used in different domains of life. Proverbs have been historically employed to establish, regulate, and legitimize gendered behaviour in various places, including South Asia Anglophone world, and reflect power disparities among different classes and genders of society.

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He maintains that proverbs have been studied from different perspectives such as the folkloristic, lexicographic, and linguistic. Most often, it is observed that proverbs are culture-specific and find expression through a particular language. Zhao (2012) suggests that social proverbs reflect the deeply rooted ideologies and cultural signs, which affect our consciousness. It is pertinent to mention that proverbs may vary because of cultural and geographical variations. However, it is an admitted fact that they are a rich source of imparting the concept of otherization among different classes. Zhao (2012) defines proverbs as "metaphors which are transferred from one generation to another". They reflect the psychological, mental, social, and intellectual development of the people by keeping a record of the social values and changes occurring in a society with the passage of time. Yeganeh et al. (2024) opine that the metaphorical implications of the proverbs are layered in nature and are perceived differently by different readers. Khan et al. (2015) illustrated that proverbs of any language mirror its history and gendered trends. Chilton (2004) is of the view that proverbial language contains a treasure house of knowledge, and they are coined very tactfully, keeping in view the cultural history. Lomotey (2020) believed that the proverbs of any language provide an insight into its gendered semiotics and tendencies. Lakoff (2003) maintained that gender roles are assigned through language that determines who will do what in the future.

Language, Social Class and Power

Foucault (1972) maintains that power exists in various modalities, and one of them is discursive. He believes that discursive power is more effective in making certain ideologies seem common sense. However, according to him, this process may take a long time, but its effects are long-lasting as well. Phillipson (1992) describes power in two forms as Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA) and Repressive State Apparatuses (RSA). Power is everywhere in action in different domains of life. It is used to disseminate desired ideology in particular contexts. He defined power as a dynamic "action upon an action" that is everywhere, inseparable from knowledge, and productive rather than merely repressive. The relationship between language and economic power is of vital significance. Social classes, economically strong and weak, find representation through language, likewise as powerful and marginalized entities. Similarly, this power asymmetry is observed as a prominent feature of proverbs.

Marxist Critique of Language

Phillipson (1992) is of the view that Ideology is constructed and propagated in/ through language. It is involved in the process of mind shaping and disseminating a desired version of ideology to the target readership. A Marxist critique of language not only takes into account linguistic and communicative approaches towards language but also takes into account the role of the economy in shaping and disseminating social values among the audience. He believes that philosophy of science is for the rich and philosophy of religion is for the poor. The rich and the poor classes find representation through language likewise. Positive and negative representation of people is given through language because of their socio-economic status. Among other means of positive and negative means of representation, proverbs are the significant ones. This study is an attempt to find out how proverbs in English and Urdu languages represent different social classes and how these proverbs reflect socio-political tendencies of a particular context over a specific time span.

Research Question

The following research question has provided a framework for the present study:

1. How do English and Urdu proverbs disseminate social class-related ideology to the readers discursively to reflect socio-political tendencies?

Literature Review

This section provides a discussion on previously conducted studies in a similar domain along with the working definitions of the key terms used in the study. The section that follows critically reviews the most relevant studies to justify the gap for the present study.

Mieder (2004) demonstrated that proverbs behave more like a sort of social directive that not only reflects common experiences, but also justifies the manner of ways of acting and behaving accepted by society. Dundes (1994) examined how gendered proverbs across diverse cultures establish hierarchical binaries. Both fe/males are represented stereotypically through proverbs and reflect societal norms. Rasul and Jinnah (2015) demonstrate that it is observed that Urdu proverbs represent women as silenced and marginalized entities. Weatherall (2002), Lazar (2005), and Sunderland (2006) argue that most of the English proverbs are asymmetrical in terms of gender representation. Most often, women are rendered invisible from the domains of power through proverbs. Positive attributes are assigned to men through proverbs. (Khan & Awan, 2020) conducted a comparative lingua-cultural analysis of Punjabi and African proverbs to give an insight into the ideologies and preferred code of conduct within a society. The findings of the study highlighted that proverbs mostly mirror the belief systems of a context, and they are a treasure house of knowledge. The study in hand correlates with the mentioned ones as it also critically decodes Urdu and English proverbs from a CSA perspective. The present study is different from the above-mentioned studies as it integrates Fairclough (2015) CSA, Lazar (2005) Feminist CDA, and Van Dijk's social-cognitive research models to analyze the selected data.

Proverb

Mieder (2004) opines that proverbs are authentic and persuasive units of language, which embody wisdom and cultural values about a particular age and context. A proverb is considered a metaphorical short sentence carrying common social values and wisdom.

Patriarchal Norms

The Patriarchal norms are the constructed ideas, expectations, and models of behaviour that give precedence to male authority and render women invisible from the domain of power.

Ideology

Ideology refers to a set of common beliefs which naturalize and legitimize power structures. Here, in this context, it means ideology related to the politicized use of language in English and Urdu proverbs.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

CDA is a theoretical and methodological tool that reveals the connection between language-power and ideology. It explores power asymmetry embedded in language. Similarly, the proverbs are gendered and represent unequal power distribution through language.

Theoretical Frameworks

The Three-Dimensional Model of Fairclough

Fairclough's (2013) model of CSA works at the following levels.

Textual Analysis

It is a process of examining language characteristics such as words, grammar, metaphors, and the construction of text. Text may be spoken, written, or in visual form.

Discursive Practice

It means how texts are produced, distributed, and interpreted within communities such as oral passing-on and communal application of proverbs.

Social Practice

This level deals with the broader sociocultural formations and power relations that create and are created by discourse. In this context, it stands for the exercise of patriarchal ideology through proverbs.

Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA)

FCDA emphasizes that patriarchal power manifests itself in the language that encourages the normalization of women's subordination and the dominance of men. Considered in the case of proverb analysis, FCDA reveals which statements restrain the agency of women, enforcing the values of silence and domestic submission, and legitimizing male control. This strategy brings out the gender-politics of proverbs and demonstrates how language serves to maintain unequal social orders.

Analysis of Data

Urdu and English Proverbs, Gender, and Patriarchal Systems

Fairclough (2013) opines that language is a social semiotic and it mirrors socio-political norms of a particular context it belongs to. It is one of the insidious weapons to do gender politics. Similarly, the proverb under analysis embodies the concept of male-dominant ideology.

Female is delicate (عورت ذات نازک) and “*smile of a woman is tempting*” (عورت اگر ہنس دے تو خرابی). “*عورت گھر بیٹھے تو بھلی*” (*better a woman be homebound*) and *عورت کی سب سے بڑی خوبصورتی خاموشی* (*the best quality in a woman is the silence*). The proverbs mentioned highlight that the concept of honor is mostly attached to women. Such examples can be had from songs and other Urdu and Punjabi literature where women are expected to behave in a manner as desired by men. Mostly, throughout history, it is observed that men have been occupying domains of power and powerful most often represent powerless negatively. In this regard, it is pertinent to mention that the concept of Man-Made Language has been dominant in history. Therefore, we find negative representation of women through proverbs and other forms of language. All this only leads to expecting women to conceal themselves, to be modest, and to keep out of the world of activities. Proverbs such as *عورت کی عزت اس کا گھر* (*A woman's honor is in her house*) literally fix female respectability with the house, meaning that going outside endangers the name of the family. Rahman (2004) maintains that English and Urdu proverbs represent women as dependent identities. It is observed that she has no house of her own. First, she is identified because of her father, and the tag of her husband is attached to her name after her marriage. This proverb contains the same ideological implications. “*بیٹی پر ایادھن*” (*daughter has to go to her next house (to her husband's house)*). Such societal constructions make women appear like commodities to exchange with, affirming the patriarchal setup. Such constructions establish the social norms about womanhood, family honor, and the way women are expected to behave.

English Proverbs and Gender Expectations

English proverbs also have their histories, but they still affirm the concept of gender stereotyping. Many of them rest on biblical undertones, metaphors, and the Victorian mindset about males' superordination and women's objectification. In the Victorian era, women were kept away from domains of power and politics, assuming that they were the weaker sex and could not do daring work. It is also assumed that a woman is more furious than hell.

Cameron (2007) and Mills (2008) argue that many English proverbs are based on those Victorian and Christian ethics that defined feminine chastity and devotion to the home as religious dogma, and if a woman violates them, she will be declared a sinner.

The integrated model used in the study to analyze the data demonstrates the relationship between linguistic preferences and sociocultural values. As an example, the Urdu proverb, “عورت ذات ہے؛ سمجھداری مرد کی ہوتی ہے” (*A woman is emotional; wisdom belongs to men*) shows how the contrasts between the lexical and presuppositions at the textual level. It renders women invisible where bravery and wisdom are concerned.

(Lazar, 2005) In Feminist CDA illustrated that the naturalization of gendered power relations is made common sense and disseminated through proverbs to win general consent about male superiority and vice versa. The construction of femininity, silence, obedience, honor, and morality has been critical in proverbs. In this perspective, such proverbs as Women are the weaker vessel and “عورت کی عقل ناقص ہے” (*A woman is deficient in intelligence*) are examined as discursive practices that accept female inferiority and justify male dominance.

Cultural proverbs like A good wife is an obedient wife and “عورت کی زبان اور آگ کا ڈھیر برابر ہے” (*A woman's tongue is a gastronomical mine*) demonstrate how cultural expressions can be used to construct the mindset of target readers to represent them as negative others. Similarly, in English proverbs repeatedly mentioned that “speak when you are spoken to” implies that women most often speak nonsense. Therefore, they should preferably stay silent.

1. Authority of men that has been legitimized, as in the case of Man is the head of the house.
2. Naturalize female subordination, as it is demonstrated by the title, عورت کی جگہ مرد کے پیچھے ہے (*A woman's place is behind the man*).
3. Add to honour and shame-based discourses such as in “عورت خاندان کی عزت ہے” (*A woman embodies the honour of the family*)
4. Form emotional oppositions, like women are emotional, عورت کی عقل گھٹیا ہوتی ہے (*the intellect of a woman is inferior*).

The examples mentioned above imply patriarchal norms at the cost of rendering women invisible from the mainstream domains of power.

Text and Linguistic Analysis

On the textual level, proverbs use certain linguistic elements such as lexical choice, metaphor, presupposition, binary opposition, and grammatical agency in order to insert patriarchal assumptions and shape gendered subjectivities.

Lexical Choices and Semantic Fields

Both spheres are interrelated and interdependent. According to many proverbs, women are placed under lexical groups that are restrictive or negative, like silence, weakness, obedience, or emotionlessness, and men are linked to rationality, wisdom, authority, and leadership.

Examples

1. Urdu: عورت کی سب سے بڑی خوبصورتی خاموشی ہے (Your silence is the best decoration of womanhood)

Lexically itself chains femininity to silence, seeing muteness itself as a virtue.

2. English language: silence is the woman's best garment; it uses metaphor to show silence as an attractive dressing, so self-repression should be feminine decency.

On the same note, the phrases “women are the weaker vessel” in the English language or “عورت کی عقل ناقص ہے” (*the intellect of a woman is not complete*) are based on the inferiority semantic fields, making women appear as flawed.

Metaphors and Structures of Symbols

Metaphor is one of the processes in which the ideology of gender is legitimised. There are two conceptual mappings that are prevailing in both language traditions. The use of metaphor shows the relation between the addresser and the addressee.

A. Woman as Property/Possession

1. Urdu: “عورت خاندان کی عزت ہے” (*A woman is the honour of the family*)

It presents womanhood as symbolic property and locates the identity of women in the shared property.

2. English: A good wife is a good possession

Feminizes women and makes them belonging subjects under the control of males.

B. Man: as Authority/ Woman: as Dependence

1. Urdu: عورت سہارے کی محتاج ہے (*a woman is in need of the support of a man*)

2. English: Man is the master of the house.

The use of these metaphors supports the notion of an inflexible hierarchy where women are subject to the authority of men. The proverbs often have implicit assumptions that introduce gender hierarchies as the truth.

1. English: The role of a woman is at home.

Proverbs like a good woman is a silent one” contribute even more to the sealing of silence and domesticity as culturally undisputed issues with femininity. According to Fairclough (2015), these presuppositions are considered to be so real as assumed truths, which preclude any possibility of dispute. It is observed through the analysis of English and Urdu proverbs that the concept of binary opposition is present. Positive attributes such as rational, brave, active, leader, and strong are used for men and vice versa.

Social Sanction and Normalization

Disciplinary tools are proverbs, which govern behaviour:

1. Women who are offensive are warned: silence is the best ornament of women.
2. Women who challenge the roles of women at home are reminded: the place of a woman is at home.
3. In Urdu, defiant women can be told:

”عورت سر جڑھ جائے تو گھر برباد ہو جاتا ہے“

(If a woman becomes dominant, the household collapses)

These expressions are cultural sanctions and policing behaviour and discourage deviation from gender norms.

Gender Socialization

Gender training is highly concerned with proverbs:

1. Boys are to be taught:

”مرد گھر کا سربراہ ہے“ (The man is the head of the house.)

Girls are taught:

”عورت برداشت کے لیے پیدا ہوئی ہے“ (“A woman is born to endure.”)

English proverbs like boys will be boys” are used to justify male privilege, whilst commands like “ladies should behave” govern female decency. These discursive actions define gender identity from an early childhood stage and therefore uphold patriarchal expectations in new generations.

Findings

The results of this research demonstrate that English and Urdu proverbs entrench patriarchal ideologies in a seemingly normal, commonplace, and culturally acceptable way. Even though these language traditions are the products of different historical and social backgrounds, the gendered messages coded in the proverbs are strikingly the same.

The phrases in English that include “silence is a woman’s best garment”, “good wife is obedient wife”, “man is the head of the house” and “women are too emotional” create a constrained image of femininity. Such expressions are repeated, with which the authors associate womanhood with silence, discipline, emotional stability, and domestic responsibility. At the same time, they promote men as rational, authoritative, and as only fit to lead. With these implicit contrasts, English proverbs are propagating an idea of the world where male dominance is expected, and female subordination is created as normal.

The Urdu proverbs that are discussed in the given study reveal a similar ideological trend but are expressed in culturally particular terms of honour (izzat), of morality and family honour. Phrases like “عورت کی سب سے بڑی خوبصورتی خاموشی” practicing, obedient, weak, and inferior to men, such sayings portray the ideal woman. Also, the Urdu wisdom lays strong moral emphasis on the actions of women through words such as Urdu proverbs “عورت ذات ناسمجھ ہوتی ہے” and “عورت کا ماکہ ہے”, “مرد گھر کا مالک ہے”, “عورت کا فرض ہے کہ وہ فرمانبردار رہے”, “عورت کا عزت ہے” and “عورت کی غلطی پورے خاندان کو رسوا کرتی ہے”. These sayings not only define women as subordinates but also as bearers of collective honour; hence, their individual behaviour is connected to that of the social status of the whole family. Although the English proverbs also relate morality with femininity, the Urdu sayings relate it in a more explicit and morally assertive way. Another essential discovery is the importance of proverbs in intergenerational socialization. Other phrases like “A woman’s place is at home” in English and in Urdu عورت برداشت کے لیے پیدا ہوئی ہے are frequently used when older people talk to the younger ones. The fact that they are repeated over and over again makes these sayings act as pedagogical instruments of a subtle nature, and it develops children into thinking about gender roles before they become critical enough to notice it. Such proverbs get internalized into daily thinking processes and therefore become normal and unchallenging as opposed to being created socially.

However, despite the line of cultural distance between English-speaking and Urdu-speaking communities, the comparative analysis also provides a common ideological basis. The two traditions are chiefly differentiated in their priorities: English proverbs are more concerned with emotional control and behavioral decency, but Urdu proverbs are more about honour and shame, moral chastity. Nevertheless, the empire of ideology is the same. Both traditions portray men as the rightful possessors of power and women as lesser, controlled by morality and bound to domestic borders. The results show that patriarchal norms have not only been perpetuated through the open system of social norms but are also perpetrated through the invisible system of daily language. The proverbs, with their catchy wording and their cultural validity, can be used as an instrument of ideological consistency, introducing limiting gender conventions as a part of inherited wisdom, or unquestionable truths.

Conclusion

This study was undertaken to explore how Urdu and English proverbs reproduce unequal gender relationships and disseminate patriarchal ideology using the insidious tool of language. The proverbs are ideological tools used to highlight existing socio-political tendencies prevailing in a particular context. It is pertinent to mention that gendered ideologies are made common sense through proverbs as well. The study finds that economy plays an important role in shaping and rupturing various ideologies including the patriarchal ideology. The analysis of the collected data highlights that gendered ideology is propagated through the use of various linguistic moves such as metaphor, supposition, binary oppositions, and evaluative words. The notion that “silence is the perfect garment of the woman” and the proverb that عورت کی سب سے بڑی خوبصورتی خاموشی ہے elevate silence as an essential marker of ideal femininity while another proverb, “man is the head of the house” and مرد گھر کا مالک ہے is natural, reasonable and just. In both languages women are portrayed as inferior, sensitive, submissive, or mentally inferior as compared to men who are seen as rational, as final decision-makers. Such linguistic patterns indicate how patriarchal assumptions become common sense with the passage of time. It affirms that proverbs are not a passive reflection of cultural realities, but they significantly contribute to the process of their creation. The study contends that language mirrors social reality and most often power group finds positive representation through language.

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