

WOMEN IN ORAL LITERATURE: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF BENGALI AND FRENCH PROVERBS

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Abstract

A proverb communicates, as we hear from our elders, a moral truth in a few words or it can be a philosophical expression, or memorable words, or even a verse or a popular saying that has “become a proverb”. Strangely, proverbs, like folk tales, are a part of daily life, especially that of elderly women. Although the younger generation does not use proverbs very often, the ideas and perspective conveyed therein remain in its subconscious. It is seen that proverbs that have been created in and by a particular society remain in currency through the language within that society. Moreover, they are influenced by society on one hand, and on the other hand, they indirectly influence society and the thought process of its users. Proverbs deal with several themes such as seasons, animals, money, agriculture and mundane activities. The present study proposes to demonstrate and compare women and her position in French and Bengali proverbs from an interdisciplinary perspective.

Here in this comparative study of French and Bengali proverbs seeks to ascertain the role and status of women through an interdisciplinary perspective involving various theories of linguistics, stylistics, semantics and gender studies. Since the proverbial discourse is sexist and misogynistic in nature, this study proposes to examine how women are represented in the said discourse. Keeping in view the hypothesis, the study seeks to find answers to the following questions: how are men and women represented in the proverbial discourse? Do the two languages (French and Bengali) represent women similarly or differently?

Key Words: proverb, women, French, Bengali, comparative study, beautiful, devil, enunciation, lexis.

Introduction

According to Simone de Beauvoir, mankind is masculine and a man defines a ‘woman’ in relation to him and not as an independent entity. The man-made language often reflects this male vision. Since proverbs are an integral part of language, proverbial discourse is also masculine. Marina Yaguello shares the same idea: “Folklore that includes tricks, tales, stories, proverbs, ballads, song [...] often portray a defamed image of women. It is one of the manifestations of

masculine expressions” (Yaguello 42). The proverbs may be similar in some respects and vary in other in different languages. This study proposes to explore how women and her position are similar or different in the French and Bengali proverbs.

A proverb is a short well-known sentence or phrase that states a general truth about life or gives advice (Crowther 933). It is the oldest of all genres of language, and has withstood the changes in the languages over time. Proverbs are brief, and usually convey meaning on two registers – one on the physical form of language and the other on the implied interior. Almost all civilizations whether in Asia, the Middle East or Europe - have proverbs that are ancient and refer implicitly to ancestors (for example: ‘our forefathers used to say...’, ‘it is said...’). Although these expressions are ancient, they have influenced the literature of different centuries, and through this, our mentality in many ways.

Proverbs belong to ordinary folk. Thus, in general, they remain anonymous. However, some are associated with sources such as literary texts as in the case of *Les Fables* written by La Fontaine or religious texts like the *Bible* or the *Rig Veda*. In these cases, they are regarded as being more “learned” (the emphasis is mine) than other proverbs. A proverb communicates, thus, a moral truth in a few words or it can be a philosophical expression, or memorable words, or even a verse or a popular saying that has “become a proverb”.

Strangely, proverbs, like folk tales, are a part of daily life, especially that of elderly women. Although the younger generation does not use proverbs very often, the ideas and perspective conveyed therein remain in its subconscious. It is seen that proverbs that have been created in and by a particular society remain in currency through the language within that society. Moreover, they are influenced by society on one hand, and on the other hand, they indirectly influence society and the thought process of its users. It is worthwhile to mention here that various ways to such as abuses, mockeries, sarcasms, pranks etc. targeting women have been used in proverbs and they are more often than not used unfortunately by women. Marina Yaguello states in this regard, “folklore that includes tricks, tales, stories, proverbs, ballads, songs ..., often portray a defamed image of women. It is one of the manifestations of masculine expressions” (Yaguello 174).

Proverbs deal with several themes such as seasons, animals, money, agriculture and mundane activities. The present study proposes to demonstrate and compare women and her position in French and Bengali proverbs from an interdisciplinary perspective.

Since the proverbial discourse is sexist and misogynistic in nature, this study proposes to examine how women are represented in the said discourse. Keeping in view the hypothesis, the study seeks to find answers to the following questions: how are men and women represented in the proverbial discourse? Do the two languages (French and Bengali) represent women similarly or differently? What kind of syntactic structures are frequently used for representing women? What kind of lexis is used to describe a woman’s status and position? Which deictic elements and “speech acts” (actes de langage) are frequently used to portray her image?

In the analysis of Bengali proverbs, first of all, Roman transliteration of Bengali sounds have been provided to help non Bengali speakers to understand the musicality of the language.

Secondly, each word has been translated literally. This has been done to convey the visual imagery and local flavour embedded in the proverbs. Thirdly, a translation has been added according to the meaning, i.e. the message / intent is given. Finally, each proverb is followed by a detailed commentary based on the interdisciplinary perspective. A simpler method has been adopted for the analysis of French proverbs. In the analysis of later, a commentary, based on interdisciplinary perspective, follows after the meaning / message of the proverb.

In the light of various definitions, it can be concluded that proverb contains all the pertinent traits of other forms of wisdom, yet it has an imaged expression and its origin remains unknown except those of sayings and maxims.

If the origin of Bengali proverbs is considered, Sukumar Sen says that its traces can be found in the time of *Rig Veda* as well. It is pertinent to mention here that in Bengali “*probad*” and “*Probochon*” are barely two variations of the word ‘proverb’.

This study comprises of four steps of transliteration, translation and interpretation in order to ease to a non Bengali reader to imbibe its meaning. For example:

Koto dhanekotochal, ginni bine althal

[a] *koto* – how much, *dhane* – of the paddy, *koto* – how much, *chal* – rice, *ginni* – female head of the family, *bine* – without, *althal* – disorder.

[b] How much paddy makes how much rice, without the female head of the family everything is in disorder.

[c] An woman knows the exact quantity of things required to run the house. Without her presence, the house hold would be in disorder.

[d] Rice is the main dish of Bengali cooking and a perfect Bengali woman knows its quantity to prepare for her family members.

Here, the role of woman is glorified through her household work. It seems to be the part of domestic politics that by giving certain importance to her work, it is implied that she may be at home to take care of the household. In this regard, Simone de Beauvoir notes “the household works are close to technical activity, yet they are very rudimentary and monotonous [...]” (Beauvoir 38).

The same steps have been provided for French proverb as well. For example:

La femme est la clef du ménage

[a] *la fam e la klef du menaje*

[b] Woman is the key to the household.

[c] According to this proverb, it is woman who can run the house well.

[d] This proverb provides two different pictures of woman, at one hand, she has the authority and therefore it is shown on the household work. On the other hand, her authority works only in regard to household work and nowhere else. Therefore, here, her authority limits her in a very particular role in her family or within four walls. In this proverb, “*la clef*” – ‘the key’ restricts the role and work of a woman and depicts her limited territory at home. This is how the key that gives her the authority, the same key draws her limit within four walls to be dominated.

Along with the feminist approach to proverbs, this study provides a syntactical, phraseological, semantic approach as well.

Enunciation or Denunciation

To understand the representation of women from the enunciative perspective, the study emphasizes on Benveniste (82)'s and Maingueneau (17)'s theory of enunciation. To analyse the position of women in the proverbial discourse, the role of 'embrayeurs' / 'shifters' (for example, the personal pronouns like 'I' and 'you', present tense etc.) and 'acte de langage' (speech acts) have been scrutinized.

According to Riegel the study of enunciation can be made through two orientations: study of deictic elements and of 'actes de langage' (580). These deictic elements help in identifying the situation and place of enunciation, i.e. who is speaking to whom, where, when, why etc. The speech acts indicate the intention, attitudes and mentality of the speakers.

Analyzing the proverbs of both the languages, it is noted to display a male discourse. This study reveals that the first and the second persons are rarely used in Bengali and French proverbs. The third person which is called "non-person" (82) by Benveniste is frequently used in both the languages. In French it is often represented by 'on' and in Bengali this non person is represented by 'tar'. The use of "third person" helps the speaker to avoid assuming responsibility in his / her speech / action. This is the reason why the use of 'je' and 'tu' in French and 'amra' in Bengali are rarely seen. The ("modalitésd'énoncés" (Riegel M. et al.)) "modality" of a sentence shows us the attitude of the speaker vis-à-vis his statement. There can be various kinds of modalities, but the proverbial discourse frequently reveals the use of adjectives and adverbs to convey the attitude of the speaker. For French, adjectives like 'petite' fille (little girl), 'jolie' fille (pretty girl), 'oeil' 'bleu' (blue eye), 'sourcil' 'blond' (blond eyebrow), are used to describe "perfect" women, whereas, in Bengali there are several expressions such as – 'goraga' (fair complexion), 'shotekshree' (more than hundred beauties) used as modalities which reflect the sexist nature of proverbial discourse towards women. Let us see two such examples:

Bj;li;Cl;hZl;S; , BçjpşfÑeM;
 dl; j; -THje -S;s; f;çlpkçc -cM;

amarbhairabon raja amisurponokha
dhoramajheemonjoraparis Jodi dekha

- (a) Bj;l (*amar*) – my, i;C (*bhai*) – brother, l;hZ (*Rabon*) – Rabon (king of Lanka according to hindu mythology), l;S; (*raja*) - king, Bçj (*ami*) – I, pşfÑeM; (*surponokha*) - Surponokha (the sister of king Rabon) dl; (*dhora*) - earth, j;-T (*majhe*) – in the midst, Hje (*emon*) – such, -S;s; (*jora*) - couple (in the sense of bonding between brother and sister), f;çlp (*paris*) – you can, kçc (*jodi*) – if, -cM; (*dekha*) – show
- (b) My brother is king Rabon, I Surponokha
 If you can find such a couple on earth show me
- (c) No bonding is comparable to that of the brother and sister
- (d) Sister is the double portion of her brother. She resembles him.

In this proverb, we find the use of first and second person. The use of the adjective possessive 'amar' (my) and 'ami' (I) indicate the use of first person and the verbs like 'paris' (can) and 'dekha' (show) indicate the listeners. By the expressions like 'my brother' and 'I Surponokha' tell us about a woman who talks about her brother and her relational bonding with him. However, it is not very clear to whom this 'you' is spoken. Here this 'you' equals 'we' or 'one'.

Another proverb in French goes on saying

Ne donne pas ta fille à un oiseleur ou à un pêcheur

- Do not give your daughter to a hunter or to a fisherman.
- This proverb obviously addresses the parents of a girl. Here, one advises not to marry off one's daughter to a bridegroom who is the hunter or a fisherman. Here, one talks about the professions very difficult to carry out.

In fact, here it is a series of advice given to a person who can be anybody. These advices are concerning the marriage of his daughter. Here it is about the different criteria for choosing a bridegroom for one's daughter. In this context, it is told about two types of jobs (hunter and fisherman) that implies extensive travel. It is interesting to note that this proverb reflects the idea of 'giving a daughter' to a man as if she is an object to be consumed.

Once again, the adjective possessive of second person in singular 'your' in masculine and feminine are the indicator to create an impression of enunciation. In this proverb, 'your' has the equal value of 'you'. But, in fact, there is no true enunciation. According to Maingueneau (17), the adjective possessive like 'your' in masculine, feminine or in plural also carry a 'general value' in French.

It has been observed that proverbs do not accuse anybody directly. Thus, most of the French proverbs are expressed through impersonal structures (*il faut que ... il vaut que ...etc.*) or indirect speech acts. In this way, the speaker of proverbs hides his identity and avoids assuming responsibility of passing cynical judgments against women. Most of the indirect speech acts in Bengali and French adverbs advice women to act according to the norms laid down by the patriarchal society.

This study reveals that even though the proverbs use 'je' (I), 'tu' (you) and the present tense, these deictic elements do not represent any real situation of enunciation. Here, 'je' and 'tu' have generic value. They do not represent any real protagonist of the situation of communication. The use of 'amar' (I) to represent the discontent of the Bengali women has sometimes been observed in Bengali proverbs. It leads to the conclusion that Bengali proverbs are less sexist than the French proverbs since women's discontent is given some visibility.

Lexis: Saint or Devil

To understand the discriminatory attitude of the language of the proverbs towards women, the study carries out a lexical analysis of proverbs of both the languages. According to McConnell-Ginet Sally (5), language is used by people living in a given society and is the vehicle of the ideas and prejudices of its people. He believes that the vocabulary of a language sketches a picture of the community life of a given society. Robert M. Krauss (9) states that the linguistic item of a language remains the same but its meaning changes according to the context. In his

opinion, often a word, when applied to a woman assumes a special meaning. To explore this, here, proverbs having words carrying double or various meanings (double-edged words) have been examined.

After having analysed these proverbs, it was found that a woman is treated, in both the languages, as a feeble and delicate person, brought up in a certain manner to remain subaltern for the rest of her life. It is found that she is never independent. She always has somebody to supervise her. Her identity does not depend on her own merit but on her father's, brother's or husband's status. In Bengali proverbs, she is always treated as being subordinate to her male partner and her womanhood depends solely on her physical beauty and in being the mother of a male child. She is expected to keep her family united and remains mostly within the four walls of the house. Her status depends on the wealth of her husband. Her position is well-reflected through the choice of vocabulary used in proverbs.

In the course of this study it has been noticed that proverbial discourse reveals two extreme images of women. She is appreciated when she represents all "the expected virtues" appreciated by a patriarchal society. She is either an ideal woman, a saint, "madonna" or a devil / "Eve" or a witch. As a perfect young girl, she is 'belle' (beautiful), 'jeune' (young) and 'modeste' (modest) according to French proverbs and she has to be 'gora' (fair complexion) and 'sundor' (beautiful) according to Bengali proverbs. Here two of the examples can be mentioned:

Belle fille et méchante robe trouvent toujours qui les accroche

[a] *bælfæe e meshôt robe troovki le zakrosh.*

[b] Beautiful lady and naughty cloths always find those who attract them.

[c] Beautiful lady and bad cloths always find those who attract them.

[d] According to this proverb, a beautiful lady draws always male attention like an opted out cloth.

This proverb shows a strange link among a beautiful young lady and an opted out cloth. Here, the composite noun 'méchante robe', expresses a «robe sexy», is apt to express the seducing nature of the cloth. As this expression has been used with 'a beautiful lady', it implies that the beautiful lady is as sexy as the robe. Thus this expression has multiple layers of meaning that can make the woman denigrating.

In Bengali,

phÑ -c; oq-l -N; s;

sorbodosh horegora

(a) *Sorbo* – all, *dosh* – flaws, *hore* – takeaway, *gora* – fair (complexion)

(b) If a woman is fair, all her flaws are taken away

(c) It is sufficient to be of fair complexion so that people ignore her flaws

(d) According to this proverb, if a woman is beautiful, all her weaknesses can be ignored.

This proverb depicts a beautiful woman as per the Bengali norms. The proverb does not provide us any information about the beauty of her eyes, her lips, or her hair, on the contrary, it talks about a fair complexion. It is interesting to note that in Bengali society the complexion is very important to define the beauty of a woman. Here, the word used for expressing the complexion is 'gora' carries two meanings: it can first of all be a fair complexion and

secondly it can also be a beautiful woman altogether. Strangely enough, noon talks about the beauty or the physical traits contributing to it of a man. Besides, the beauty of a woman renders a special favor to her and that is the forgiving nature of other towards her mistakes.

As a perfect young married lady she is worshipped as a *'mère'* (mother) or she is appreciated as *'grihini'* / *'ginni'* (a perfect woman who manages the household chores). If she can not be a 'perfect' woman, she is compared, with animals like *'poule'* (hen), *'rat'* (rat) in French. As an aged woman, she is never idealised. In French proverbial discourse, the end of her life is implored - through expressions such as *'si la terre la couvre'* (if the earth could bury her) – or she is *'légumelourd à digérer'* (an indigestible vegetable), *'revêche'* (sour-tempered), or *'méchante'* (wicked). In Bengali proverbs, an old lady is always the *'shotru'* (enemy) of the house. Men, on the contrary, are respected as *'gurujon'* (husband and a respected elder), *'shoshur'* (father-in-law – head of the family), *'raja'* (king). Whereas, in French proverbs, a man is desirable because he is *'amoureux'* (lover) and *'vieux'* (old by way of experience).

Conclusion

Through this comparative study, it has been noted that despite the significant differences between the two cultures, the role and the image of women is not very different in the Bengali and French proverbial discourse. A woman is always blamed for any problem in the house. She is appreciated as long as she can withstand any adverse situation in the family, can reproduce and keep the family united. Strangely, the Bengali proverbs never speak about women's sexuality or her relationship with another female friend. It is interesting to note that Bengali proverbs do mention the relation of a woman with other family members especially the rapport between a brother and sister, whereas this kind of relation is not mentioned in French proverbs. In Bengali proverbs, the male discourse talks also about a woman's role at her in-law's house and her duties towards her father-in-law, brother-in-law, sister-in-law, etc. This kind of projection is also not visible in the French proverbs.

The proverbial discourse talks about different stages in the lifespan of a woman, yet it never mentions anything about the stages that only a woman goes through, like - puberty, pregnancy, abortion, breast-feeding and menopause. This proves once again that proverbial discourse has originated from a male vision.

Before concluding, it would be pertinent to mention that this study has a few limitations. While translating Bengali and old French proverbs, certain old / archaic expressions have been encountered. Some of these expressions have multiple meanings. Further, sociological and historical points of view could have been incorporated, which, needless to add, would have crossed the given parameter of the study and resulted in an unmanageable corpus. Despite the constraints, it is important to remember that in this era of globalisation where local traditions and oral genres are fast disappearing. It will be most unfortunate if one day proverbs survive only in dictionaries.

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