

CHALLENGES TOWARD WOMEN AND HER IDENTITY – AN OVERVIEW OF OUR ORAL LITERATURE

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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”¹. The proverbs may be similar in some respects and vary in other in different languages. This study proposes to explore how the representation of women is similar or different in the proverbs of east and west.

A proverb is a short well-known sentence or phrase that states a general truth about life or gives advice². 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 not only the literature of different centuries, but, our mentality in many ways.

the definition of the term itself employ sometimes terms that are almost synonyms such as practical advice, sayings, etc. If we are to summarise general understanding of proverbs, we have to admit that Proverbs are accepted as short pithy sentences, expressing wisdom, often metaphorical and passed on from one generation to another and proverbs belong to ordinary folk. Thus, in general, they remain anonymous. However, some are associated with sources such as religious texts like the *Bible* or the *Rig Veda*. In these cases, they are regarded as being more “learned³” than other proverbs.

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. This subconscious mind speaks out when one gives opinion on something and there somewhere it leaves a trace of those proverbs lies within one’s subconscious self.

¹ YAGUELLO M., (1979), *Les mots et les femmes*, Payot, Paris.

² CROWTHER J., (1995), *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, p. 933.

³ The emphasis is mine.

Proverbs deal with several themes such as seasons, animals, money, agriculture and mundane activities. The theme of women is one among those that I am going to elaborate here in this context. Since the proverbial discourse is sexist and misogynistic in nature, it is interesting to examine how women are represented in the said discourse.

There are number of proverbs that talks about women or related issues. For example:

- One who cannot tolerate smoke cannot be a good cook.
- The head of all domestic affairs wears simple jewelry whereas the daughter-in-law wears gold jewelry.
- Beauty and the beast
- Beauty alone does not marry a girl
- Virginity is the treasure of an young woman

Etc.

Firstly, It is to be noted that the theme of beauty and tolerance recur in different forms. In proverbs in our country like in Bengali, a woman is appreciated for her physical beauty and her capability of becoming a good cook (*‘rādhuni’*) and maintaining good relation among the family members (*‘ginni’*). The concern for beauty is found more in Bengali proverbs, while western proverbs speak explicitly of virginity and modesty instead and seem to prepare young girls to be good brides.

Bengali proverbs sometimes portray a woman as a speaker rejecting and rebelling against the traditional values laid down by the society. ‘Shall I wash and drink the name of the community, shall lie down on the bed of my long thick hair’. However, western proverbs do not have such examples.

It is interesting to note that the advice given in the proverbs is never addressed directly to a woman. It is given in most cases to her parents or guardian. French proverb goes on to say: ‘marry your daughter when she is still young, marry your son when he is capable of’.

A good number of proverbs lay emphasis on the importance of obedience, right behaviour, right dress code of women like ‘an ugly woman of loving nature is also acceptable’ or ‘boat, horse and woman-belong to the person who uses them’ (*‘petniq’*, *‘tari’*).

There are proverbs where we find that a woman, especially in our country, is respected for her commitment to her family-‘how much rice comes out of how much paddy, without a home maker the house is in disorder’. On the contrary, western proverbs do not mention the commitment of a woman towards her family / her husband’s family. They are silent on her relationship with her other family members.

It has been observed that proverbs do not accuse anybody directly. Thus, most of the proverbs are expressed through 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 proverbs advice women to act according to the norms laid down by the patriarchal society – in this regard, a French proverb says ‘it is better to stay at home and make bread rather than roaming about in the garden’. Even, the deictic elements like ‘I’, ‘you’ and the present tense used in proverbs do not represent any real situation of enunciation. They do not represent any real protagonist of the situation of communication.

Now, we need to understand the negative representation of women as portrayed in the proverbs of east and west through the visual and acoustic imagery.

It revealed that proverbs use metaphors to avoid making explicit negative statements against women. Three models of insult we can figure out through which proverbs marginalize

women. In the first model, proverbs comparing women with ordinary objects like ‘*mirmire piddim*’ (faded away lamp) ‘a slow woman and a faded away lamp are of equal worth’ or referring to them in pejorative terms like ‘*petni*’ (witch) in Indian regional proverbs, and ‘*sept livres de merde*’ (seven pounds of shit) ‘a mother shall eat seven pounds of shit’, or ‘*diable*’ (devil) particularly in French have been seen. In the second model, proverbs employing double-edged words or expressions are used to insult women. It has been noticed that proverbs in French like: *une bonne femme vaut une couronne* (a good woman deserves a crown) - here, ‘good’ and ‘crown’ can have double meaning and in Bengali proverbs like: *obolar mukhei bol* (the strength of a weak woman lies in her speech) - here, the word ‘strength’ can have double interpretation. The third model of insult is the use of mythological characters in the midst of proverbs. In Bengali, proverbs compare women with different mythological characters like ‘*Surponakha*’, ‘*Parboti*’, ‘*Soti*’ to marginalize her active role. In French, words like ‘*ange*’ (angel) and ‘*diable*’ (devil) are used to convey the expected and accepted behavior of women in a patriarchal society. It is important to mention that the mention of many mythological characters in Indian proverbs have been observed, whereas, in western proverbs no Biblical characters (except angel and devil!) are seen to figure. Rhyme and rhythm are an integral part of proverbs. They help in emphasizing on key words and main ideas. Their rhythm makes proverbs more subtle and faster. To sum up, metaphors and musicality are devices of memorability which facilitate mental storage and retrieval of proverbs. These memorability has been revealed in today’s TV serial as they all depict the same kind of marginalized ideas and poor image of women through various levels of indecency. Till date, women are not appreciated beyond these qualities set and carried by and through proverbs.

It won’t be wrong to say here that it has been noted that despite the significant differences between the two cultures, the representation of women is not very different in the Bengali and French proverbial discourse and despite the progress over the years since the proverbs have been created, the representation of women is not very different from past. Whether in television based mega serial or in proverbs, 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, in our country, for example, 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. It is in 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 western proverbs like in French and in serials this male discourse has been repeated and reinforced by female within the four walls.

The proverbial discourse of east or west, 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. This vision is very carefully maintained in TV serials as well behind a curtain of well versed dialogue.

Here, it would be pertinent to mention that it is our duty as women to look at this domain of oral and folk literature where lies our regional and cultural identity 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.