

The representation of women in Moroccan proverbs

Meryem Belfatmi

English Department, Mohamed V university, Morocco

Abstract: This study looks into a number of Moroccan proverbs to see whether proverbs support women secondary position in society. The fact that a proverb's authority has the function of legitimizing certain role patterns as well as preventing those patterns from possibly being questioned, we want to discover the main attributions that are attached to women while talking about proverbs in Morocco. Women's secondary position is faithfully mirrored in culture. Nothing defines the latter as clearly as its language. This language, in turn, encapsulates a society's thoughts, beliefs and values. The fact that proverbs are part of people's popular culture which includes language, it is important to know how these proverbs function and how they are structured to both convey and maintain certain man made ideologies and policies. Moreover, since proverbs are based on common sense and practical experience of humanity, they call into question the extent of their truth and validity.

This article focuses on the different representations of women in Moroccan proverbs. It shows an analytical comparison of these proverbs on the basis of women and gender differences. Our focus is based on the idea that proverbs maintain certain beliefs and attitudes that last for ages. Yet, these attitudes are not always positive, mainly when it comes to women. Therefore, we suppose that these proverbs with negative gender connotations should be altered.

Keywords: gender discrimination, popular culture, proverbs,

I. Introduction

This article focuses on the social construction of gender in proverbs. It examines the portrayal of women through Moroccan proverbs. In this particular part however, we will introduce some definitions of popular culture, since proverbs occupy a major part in this culture. The second section revolves around major definitions of the term "proverb", its functions, characteristics and its uses. The last section will shed some light on some gender theories which aim at understanding the nature of gender roles and relations in the Moroccan community.

Our interest in researching women stereotypes in proverbs is motivated by a number of reasons: firstly, proverbs are part of people's everyday life and they are considered to express collective wisdom and truth. However, after a number of observations, we found out that these proverbs carry different false truths that should loom on the horizon of a community, especially, the Moroccan community where illiteracy resides. Secondly, knowing that proverbs are fading away gradually in most societies motivates us to revive some of these proverbs but at the same time shed some light on gender discrimination that most proverbs discuss. Finally, we do believe that this paper will highlight some misconceptions of those proverbs, therefore people's awareness not only will be raised but they will pay a great attention when using proverbs that are based on gender biases which spread some false truths and behaviour.

II. Literature review

1.1 Proverbs and gender discrimination

2.1.1 Theories

Since proverbs are part of a given society or culture, they reflect all features of a society (traditions, habits, democracy, equality, gender...) and vice versa. So, the proverbs of a certain country may determine certain features about the society they originate from. Starting from this perspective, researchers and activists were interested in investigating the extent to which proverbs do reflect their society and the extent to which the beliefs, conceptions, perceptions and expectations of a society are reflected in their proverbs, that is why a wide range of studies and analysis were run all over the world to understand this phenomenon.

In his article, "the Triarchy that breeds human rights violations, patriarchs/priests/ preceptors" Yuksel (1993,P.65) asserts that because of some characteristics of proverbs (rhythm, rhyme, parallelism, simple language, short forms). They attract the attention of others and they are easily memorized. So, they are transferred from one generation to another and this fact leads to the creation of certain attitudes towards gender, race, religion etc, which are preserved and transmitted from one person to another. Yksel found that women were perceived like evil and were compared to animals such as dogs, horses, cats etc. Thus, this fact shows that

women are not only locally undervalued or discriminated, but they are universally underestimated. This fact is also illustrated in this quotation proposed by Yksel (1993,P.66)

“Almost every proverb that touches on women contains a severe negation of the value of women in society”¹

Concerning the impact of proverb on society Yuksel claims that though proverbs try to convey wisdom, what they actually do are “brainwash” people, using false generalizations and stereotypical conceptions. That is to say, the more new and false generalizations are conveyed in proverbs, the more changes occur in people’s perceptions and conceptions about certain issues. For him, the use of proverbs gives the speaker prestige. In oral culture, people are impressed by those who have many proverbs at their disposal and know how to use them at the right moment. The audiences’ moral acceptance of the proverbs strengthens the speaker’s message:

“The proverb is associated with the authority of wisdom. Referring to wisdom’s unquestioned validity, the speaker deserves respect and authority himself... the man who exhibits his wisdom confirms traditional values and the existing power relations. Thus, he “gets what he wants”

Yuksel concludes his study of proverbs and human rights especially women’s rights by saying:

“I believe that educating people regarding the negative messages embedded in their language and folklore will help to create a generation sensitive to human rights”²

Therefore, as much as we try to raise the awareness of individuals towards the false and biased generalizations in proverbs, as much they will be more sensitive to what violates and upholds human rights. In this way, a democratic and equal society could be created.

Another study was conducted by Yusuf (1993,P.66) whose paper investigates how 46 English proverbs and Yoruba proverbs compare women to animals, food, plants, property, and trouble.

Women and food/ plants: in her study of the sample of proverbs comparing women to food or plants, she noticed that women were compared to meat, in their marital life, because making love to a woman was compared to eating meat. By this latter, women have no value other than being mere sexual objects, predisposed to satisfy males’ desires.

Women and property: in this section, women were compared to a “filled” house and “tilled” field. According to the proverbs, a man treats his wife very gently as long as she remains passive and inanimate. When she happens to act otherwise, the man treats her differently, and he addresses her like an enemy. Furthermore, women correlated also with “ship” with regard to their ability to bring trouble to their owners who are men of course. In fact, women were also considered as men’s property.

2.2 Gender inequality: theories of origin

The relationship between men and women is not only one of difference in biology or gender roles but also one of inequality. This inequality between men and women, known by gender inequality, is manifested in many forms. It starts from home when parents prefer the newborn to be male rather than female, and extends to other fields and activities such as schooling, access to higher education and professional inequality in terms of employment and promotion in work. Both feminists and anthropologists have focused on this inequality which stresses women’s inferiority to men. They reject the idea that gender is natural. Thus, they provide subordinate position of women because of inequality. They display little agreement about the causes of gender inequality.

Three feminist approaches, the liberal, radical and socialist, try to provide different explanations for the roots of gender inequality. Liberal feminism declares the prevalence of gender inequality from which nobody benefits in that it causes harm to both sexes. “While females are denied access to high-status jobs, males are deprived of the pleasure of having close relationships with their children” Haralambos and Holborn. Liberal feminism explains that gender inequality in terms of culture and social subordination. Betty Friedan, who is described by Gamble as “the leading liberal feminist of second wave”, maintains that lack of equal rights in different fields including education is the root of women’s oppression.

When some feminists began to perceive the inequality between women and men, they used the term, more specifically the adjective “radical” signifying their commitment to seek the origin of the root cause of this inequality. Shula Smith Firestone is the first radical feminist who provides the explanation of gender inequality. Throughout her work, *The dialects of sex* (1970), she stresses that the root cause of women’s subordination in their biology. The latter, which includes menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding, makes women be dependent on men. This dependence inevitably produces unequal power relationships.

Other radical feminists argue that patriarchy is the origin of inequality existing between males and females. Kate Millet is the first radical feminist who used the term to explain women’s subordination. In her *Sexual Politics* (1969), she maintains that patriarchy is perpetuated by the family, being the primary source of

socialization which provides men with dominant temperament. She believes that patriarchy is the cause of many social problems that women encounter. She also argues that gender inequality is not related to social class but to male domination over women. Radical feminism sees that men have benefited of inequality, women, on the other hand, carry out unpaid work in higher jobs positions. Unlike liberal feminism which claims that gender inequality should be reformed, radical feminism believes that it should be eradicated.

Marxist and socialist feminism, nevertheless considers the total system of capitalism as the root of women's oppression. It "believes that women are second class citizens in patriarchal capitalism which depends for its survival on the exploitation of working people and on the special exploitation of women"³Humm. One way to get rid of gender inequality is the establishment of a communist society in which production of wealth is commonly owned. They also focused on unpaid work for women inside the home and confirm that the fundamental solution of gender inequality is "wage (or preferably) salaried employment"⁴Hart. They, therefore, relate gender inequality to economic differences.

The origin of gender inequality is not only restricted to feminists but it has also attracted the attention of many anthropologists. The anthropologist Sherry Ortner (1972); for example, believes that the origin of gender inequality lies in the way culture perceives and addresses women's biology. She agrees with Firestone about the fact that women are universally oppressed when stating that in every known culture all over the world, women are considered and viewed as inferior to men. However, she disagrees with her when claiming it is not biology alone that relegates women to an inferior status. She explains this inequality in terms of culture and nature stating that culture, including technology and people's ideas, has power over nature. Being the origin of women's subjection, the supremacy of culture over nature perceives women and their role as mothers as closer to nature than men, therefore, as inferior entities.

III. Data presentation and analysis

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Proverbs in this study are categorized according to their content. The meaning of each proverb is discussed with reference to the social and cultural factors that influenced their production, adopting the subject matter method of classification to describe the cycle of women and men, with a special emphasis on women. In the analysis of the data, some of the proverbs that look alike are discussed together.

We have been able to collect our data, thanks to printed and non printed sources, mainly from Moroccan Arabic books that tackle the issue of women and from the internet. We classified our data according to various themes that we found relevant to shed light on gender differences. We started from the home, the theme that defines women according to the private sphere. Choosing women and the private sphere as the first theme stresses the idea that gender differences and biases starts at "home" and gradually come to exist outside the home. The other following themes are classified according to their frequency, use and power in society.

.3.2 Gender representation in proverbs

The purpose of this section is to analyze some Moroccan proverbs to understand some of Moroccan people's social and relational aspects. More specially, it delves into the analysis of some gender-related proverbs to uncover the social status of women and the way they are perceived within their area. The section tries, through proverbs, to delineate the life cycle of women and men, with a special emphasis on women.

3.2.1 Introduction to the domestic sphere

According to Davis(2001.36) "marriage and raising a family is the goal for which girls are prepared almost since birth". Differently put, for Davis the girl is often perceived as a responsible person from her early childhood. The way she is brought up qualifies her to maintain the role of her mother. She has to be restricted to the domestic sphere, to be a good wife and avoid some flaws.

Girls are raised in a way that makes them believe that their sole role is to stay inside the home and help their mothers. Unlike boys, they are not introduced to the public sphere. Yet, they are convinced to be restricted only to the house and perform the tasks commonly associated with the 'housewife'.

1) El-mRa hiya qfel elbi:t
(A woman is the key of her house)

2) Mu :lat eddar 3maRa waxxa tku :n Hmara
(A housewife is a better even if she looks like a donkey)

3) El-mRa mahiya illa xadem fddaR , u masayqa lRasha xba:r
(A wife is nothing but a maid in her house, but she is not aware of that)

Both spheres, namely, the public and the private sphere have been translated into oppositions along lines of males and females. Women are chained to the home, a place where they are obliged to remain, whereas the public sphere belongs to men. The above proverbs confirm the previous point. They confine women to the home and have them stay there, preferably until the end of their lives. The first proverb for example, states that "a woman is the key of her house". In other words, women here are equated to keys, without keys a house remains unsafe, therefore, anybody would seize an opportunity to steal what might be precious in the unlocked house. By the same token, if a woman leaves her house, it would have no value. Thus, a wife should be imprisoned within until she dies.

As revealed in the first proverb, the second and the third proverbs also insist on the previous point. In other words, a woman's place is restricted to the private sphere which is home. These two proverbs equate a woman to either an animal or a servant; both names confirm women's inferiority within her small society which is her family. In the second proverb a woman is compared to a donkey. The proverb says "a woman is essential inside her house even if she looks like a donkey". The proverb puts women and donkeys on equal footing, no matter how intelligent or stupid they are. Women are dissuaded from transgressing the borders of their own fixed place, which is the private place. The other proverb, on the other hand, equates women to servants. Normally, servants are paid for their work each month, wives, however, are suppressed slave servants in their own houses without being aware of it: "a woman is a servant in her house without her knowledge". The metaphor of the servant stresses the ongoing inferiority women confront in their society

3.2. 2 Women and beauty

- 1) Wled bentk zwi:na amma leHdaga ta:t3əllamha
(Beget a beautiful daughter and she will learn the rest)
- 2) nəkəH el-mRa 3la zinha ula Bhaha
(Marry a woman either for her beauty or her charm)
- 3) el-məRa zzwina tsstahel tHu :z el-mdina
(The beautiful woman deserves to lead the city)

Women are generally judged by their appearance. Beautiful women are believed to be more open-minded, more intelligent and are better accepted by society. Proverbs related to beauty convey the same sense. In the first proverb, women should be beautiful, as the most important criteria. Furthermore, it is believed by many that anything else apart from beauty can be tolerated and acquired with time.

Both the second and the third proverb, stress on beauty rather than anything else. In the second proverb, a man is warned about marrying ugly woman for, according to the proverb, the only criterion a woman is chosen by, as a wife, lays in her beauty. The third proverb maintains the same idea. It says that "a beautiful woman deserves to lead a city". Regardless of whether a woman is intelligent or not, she should be beautiful.

3.2.3 Women and intellect

- 1) zzin zi:na u la3qel nŠRih li:k
(She is beautiful, but I need to buy her a brain)
- 2) El-mra rba3 39el
(A woman is the quarter of an intellect)
- 3) El-mra ness 39el
(A woman is half a brain)

The brain is used as a metaphor in most proverbs. It symbolizes intelligence, whereas beauty, in most cases, is related to stupidity. Many proverbs state that beauty is an important feature to women; brains however should be kept for men. Brain and beauty have set men against women as two separate entities, associating men with inner qualities while women with appearance, outer beauty. Men are associated with reason, thought, intelligence and wisdom, whereas women are associated generally, with emotion, tenderness and lack of logic.

Many proverbs assert that women, by their innateness, have no brains. As it has been put in the first proverb of this theme "she is beautiful, but I need to buy her a brain". This proverb asserts that the general saying that states that brain and beauty cannot be found in one and the same person. To put it different, women's importance lies in their beauty, the brain, however, could be bought.

It is also believed that women's brains are limited "women have half a brain" or "women have a quarter brain. Having only half or a quarter brain should prevent women from ever trying to compete with the supposedly whole male brain. Besides, it is argued in the following proverb that "ten of women's brain equals one man's brain" that is to say that women are stupid by nature; a woman needs nine other brains to equal one man's intelligence. In other words, what a man could do in a second, women need years and years to equal a man's achievement.

From what has been said so far, it can be concluded that women's heads and brains are suspicious part of female bodies and require severe control.

3.2. 4 Violence against women

1) el-mra ila makla:tŠ el3əssa men el-had el-had tgu:l maqedha hed

(If you don't beat your wife every Saturday, she will revolt)

2) El-mra bHal l-eHmar merra merra xəssu yetnrəz

(Women are like donkeys, one should beat them from time to time)

3) Dreb el-mra tertaH

(If you want to relax, beat your wife)

Violence against women was a natural phenomenon in the past. It was looked at as mere routine. Nowadays, however, this issue is publicly debated, when it was commonly accepted as a way of controlling women. In the last few years many associations have been founded to defend women's rights and aim to reduce violence against them.

Most Moroccan proverbs that deal with violence, including the ones above, are to be found recommending wife beating as a natural tool for forcing wives into a submissive behavior. Almost all the proverbs related to violence, indirectly argue that women are man's property, therefore, they can be disposed of and handled at their will. In the first and the second proverb, for instance, it is stated that a woman deserves beating from time to another otherwise she will turn to be out of control. The metaphor here is that women are like animals and to keep them in control they should be beaten from time to time. The latter point has been clearly stated in the second proverb that says a woman is like a donkey, and should be beaten from time to time. In the third proverb, it is argued that the satisfied man is the one who beats his wife. In this particular proverb, men's satisfaction is conditioned by beating their wives. As if a woman is the source of men's anxieties and problems in life; she is there only to poison her husband's delight and makes him disturbed all the time. Therefore, men's satisfaction and happiness could be achieved if and only if they beat their wives.

Unlike the numerous proverbs that recommend or approve wife beating, I found no single proverb referring to physical violence against men. I deduced then, in societies where power is in men's hands, it is almost impossible to find any reference that under-estimate men especially violence against them, because violence against men is a sign of shame, lack of personality, humiliation and defeat to men.

3.2. 5 Women as evil creatures

1) El-3gu :Za kθaR men e-ŠŠita:n

(The mother in law is more vicious than the devil)

2) Elli y3amlu ibli:ss f 3am t3amlu l3guza f sa3a

(What the devil can do in one year, the mother in law can do in one hour)

3) el-məRa lef3a u mHazma b-ibliss

(A woman is a snake and gird by the devil)

Although throughout history many hypotheses have accused men and women of being evil by nature, women have far more often been stereotyped as such. In the past, older women in particular and wives more generally, were often accused of devilry. The reason for this stigmatizing message is that in most societies women have been marginalized. Therefore, men believe that women befriended devils and became part of the devil world.

Mysterious female powers are most strongly associated with old age. A woman as "evil creature's theme" opens up with two proverbs where old women, especially mothers in law, represent a major threat. The first one says "a mother in law is more vicious than a devil". In other words, mothers in law are more powerful and more evil than a devil. The latter stereotype has been carved in both males and females' minds. It also explains the reason behind the ongoing conflict between a wife and a mother in law. The second proverb asserts the same idea; it says "what a devil might do in one year, a mother in law could do it in one hour". This proverb not only associates women with the devil but also stresses that they know a point more than the devil. She is able to destroy everything around her in some fractions of seconds.

The idea of Satan or the devil has been projected on to "woman" as the imagined "dark" side of man. She has been represented as both a devil and a snake. In the following proverb "a woman is a snake and gird by devils" a woman is not only suspected of having a special power, "the power of devils" but also she is compared to a snake. The snake was used as a metaphor of danger and threat, it slithers to take revenge from whoever tries to harm it. The same thing a woman does, according to this proverb, woman, especially wives, have the power of destructive practices and wreaking havoc. They are accused of taking revenge from those who cause harm to them, especially, their husbands. As it comes in the words of the fifth proverb "needless to sleep if a woman swears on you", women are pictured as non-humane, more specifically as animals. This proverb indicates that women don't tolerate those who try to harm them. They might seize any opportunity to avenge themselves, regardless of what the results might be.

The last proverb, however, women were looked at in a different way. The proverb asserts that a woman combines both powers, namely, good and evil. This proverb alludes to the fact women are the source of good as well as evil. She is a decisive factor in marriage: she seems to be able to make it or to break it. A wife either has a good influence on her husband or she destroys his life; she either makes him young or she makes him old; she makes a man out of him or turns him into a dust. She is either a treasure or a pestilence. She is therefore the two faces of the same coin.

In a nut shell Women are sought out as an agent of destruction. They are accused of bewitching out of an innate capacity and are depicted as a threat to society.

IV. Conclusion

The present study sought to investigate “Moroccan proverbs and female stereotypes”. This study was an attempt to explore how Moroccan women are represented in proverbs, to see whether proverbs discriminate against them or not.

To achieve the objectives of this study on women representation in proverbs, we collected a number of proverbs from different sources that tackle women’s issues.

Different conclusions have been drawn from the data analysis.

First, proverbs are associated with established wisdom. They have a powerful impact on our society that is based mainly on oral tradition. Proverbs, still represent the backbone of the Moroccan society, they have the function of legitimizing certain stereotypes, especially, those related to women. Second, Proverbs confirm by their very nature the social norms. They maintain ideologies that put women in a secondary position, while they valorize and put men in higher positions related to governance and dominance. A proverb provides its speaker a safe way to criticize, mock or even insult, for they are argued to be truths and nobody is allowed to question them, since they are believed to be sacred. Our parents and our grandparents, including women, insist on the collective acceptance of the dominant norms and values to be taken for granted.

Third, a proverb frequent use make of persistent stereotypes. They exaggerate, idealize, simplify, and joke for the benefit of the dominant classes, and since Morocco is typical a patriarchal society, proverbs maintain the male dominance in society. Contradictory gender view are made visible in proverbs, one openly and directly, and the other mostly hidden between lines.

Finally, in the data analysis of the proverbs collected we have seen how two main views of all men and women are constantly echoed. In most proverbs men are pictured as predators, profiteers and tyrants. Women in most cases are represented as weak, vulnerable, stupid and mainly victims of an ideology that is maintained by men.

This monograph not only uncovers women representation in Moroccan proverbs, but it indirectly includes men’s representation in these proverbs. These proverbs were categorized according to seven main themes that are related to women. They discuss women’s relationship with different issues.

This research about proverbs was a wonderful experience for me. It touches all aspects of human being. Everybody loves to read about proverbs since it is believed to be related to human existence.

Research implications:

This study may pave the way to conduct further research on the representation of women in proverbs all over the world. In addition, this research triggers an interest in evaluating our understanding of the Moroccan culture, especially gender differences in society. Another interesting area of research is exploring the effect of Moroccan proverbs on the Moroccan society and in the construction of our identity. Moreover, investigating the difference between men and women in proverbs could also be interesting since it would not only raise people’s awareness of this particular issue, but they would be more careful before using a proverb that is pregnant with ideological implications.

Table of symbols

Universal transcription	Arabic equivalent alphabets
/a:/	أ
/b/	ب
/t/	ت
/j/	ج
/H/	ح
/x/	خ
/d/	د
/r/	ر
/R/	ر
/Z/	ز
/D/	ض
/Š/	ص
/T/	ط

/k/	ك
/l/	ل
/m/	م
/n/	ن
/ʒ/	ع
/r/	ر
/f/	ف
/q/	ق
/s/	س
/ʃ/	ش
/h/	ه
/w/	و
/y/	ي
/i/	إ
/o/	ؤ
/u:/	وو

Bibliography

Chapter in books

- [1]. Wolfrang Yksel. Women in proverbs. Oxford university. 1993:P.65,66
- Books
- [2]. Mineke Schipper. African proverbs and sayings on women. Chicago,1989.P.3
- [3]. M.Haralambos andHolborn. sociology: themes and perspectives. London.1991.P.536)
- [4]. ¹ N. Gamble. Feminism and society. London. 2001.P.264
- [5]. Arthur. Davis. Moroccan female power negotiation. l'MEDIA.2001.36

Arabic references

Books

- Mekdad Kassim, *the concept of culture in sociology*. United arab books.Demashk.2002
- ✓ المقداد قاسم. *مفهوم الثقافة في العلوم الاجتماعية*. اتحاد كتاب العرب. دمشق 2002
- Nashaoui Ahmad Abd Mwjoud, *the cultural identity of the rural society*. The House of Egypt.Cairo 2007
- ✓ الشناوي احمد عبد الموجود. *الهوية الثقافية للمجتمع البدوي*. دار مصر المحروسة. القاهرة. 2007