

Linguistic Marginalization of Women in Pashto Proverbs: A Feminist Discourse Analysis

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Abstract: *This study explores the linguistic marginalization of women as reflected in Pashto proverbs through the lens of feminist discourse analysis. Proverbs, as a cultural repository, carry deeply ingrained societal beliefs and values, often reinforcing gender stereotypes and patriarchal norms. By examining a selected corpus of Pashto proverbs, this research highlights how language perpetuates the subordination of women, portraying them as inferior, dependent, or overly emotional. The analysis delves into the metaphorical, symbolic, and narrative structures of these proverbs to uncover implicit biases and their impact on gender perceptions within Pashtun society.*

Adopting a feminist framework, the study challenges the normalization of such narratives by advocating for a critical reinterpretation of traditional wisdom to foster gender equality. This research underscores the importance of deconstructing linguistic tools of oppression and encourages the promotion of language that celebrates and empowers women, paving the way for a more inclusive sociolinguistic culture.

Keywords: marginalization, Pashto proverbs, Feminism, Gender Discrimination, Patriarchy, Pashtun Society

Introduction

Language is a powerful tool that shapes perceptions, constructs realities, and perpetuates ideologies. In patriarchal societies, language often becomes a medium for reinforcing gender inequality. Proverbs, as condensed expressions of cultural wisdom, play a significant role in shaping societal attitudes and behaviors. In the context of Pashtun culture, Pashto proverbs are a repository of traditional knowledge, encapsulating the values, norms, and beliefs of the community. However, these proverbs are not neutral; they are deeply embedded in the patriarchal fabric of society and often reflect and perpetuate gender biases (Spender, 1980).

The Pashtun people of Afghanistan and Pakistan speak Pashto, sometimes called Pakhtu or Pukhto, a language that is a member of the Iranian branch of the Indo-European language. It is believed that 38 million people speak Pashto globally. Pashto is widely spoken in Afghanistan and Pakistan. It is generally believed that around 12 million people in Afghanistan and 26 million people (almost 90% of the population) speak in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan. In addition, there are Pashto speakers in Baluchistan and Karachi, where there are almost two million native speakers. Furthermore, around 50,000 native Pashto speakers reside in Iran (Rahman, 1995).

The marginalization of women in language is a global phenomenon, with cultural variations. In Pashto proverbs, women are frequently portrayed in subordinate roles, depicted as inferior, dependent, or

morally questionable. Such linguistic representations contribute to the socialization process, shaping the collective consciousness and reinforcing gender hierarchies.

Proverbs are an integral aspect of cultural heritage, reflecting societal values, traditions, and beliefs. They serve as tools for transmitting intergenerational wisdom, providing moral guidance, and reinforcing societal norms. In Pashtun society, proverbs are deeply woven into the cultural fabric, influencing day-to-day interactions and shaping individual and collective worldviews. However, the portrayal of women in Pashto proverbs often aligns with patriarchal ideologies, reinforcing restrictive gender roles, stereotypes, and marginalization. This phenomenon underscores the need to critically analyze these proverbs to uncover the layers of gendered bias embedded within. This study seeks to uncover the extent and nature of linguistic marginalization in Pashto proverbs, focusing on the ways in which these proverbs construct and perpetuate patriarchal ideologies (Jan, 2022).

Importance of Proverbs in Pashtun Society

In Pashtun culture, proverbs are not mere linguistic expressions but powerful tools of socialization. They encapsulate the essence of Pashtunwali—the Pashtun code of conduct—which emphasizes honor, hospitality, and adherence to traditional values. Proverbs are used in various contexts, such as conflict resolution, moral instruction, and interpersonal communication. Despite their cultural significance, many proverbs perpetuate harmful stereotypes, particularly about women, portraying them as subordinate, dependent, or inherently flawed.

Objectives of the Study

To identify and analyze gendered themes in Pashto proverbs.

To understand the impact of these proverbs on societal attitudes towards women.

To critique these proverbs through a feminist lens to advocate for linguistic and cultural transformation.

Research Questions

What recurring themes in Pashto proverbs contribute to the marginalization of women?

How do these proverbs reinforce patriarchal norms in Pashtun society?

What role can feminist discourse analysis play in challenging these norms?

Literature Review

Proverbs and Cultural Representation

Proverbs serve as mirrors of cultural values, encapsulating societal norms, traditions, and ideologies. Hussein (2005) argues that proverbs are not neutral linguistic artifacts but cultural tools that often reflect and perpetuate patriarchal structures. This observation is echoed by Gibson (2019), who highlights how proverbs across cultures consistently marginalize women by portraying them as subservient or inferior. In the context of Pashtun society, proverbs act as reinforcers of traditional gender roles, limiting women's agency and autonomy.

Feminist Discourse Analysis

Feminist discourse analysis (FDA) offers a framework for examining how language perpetuates gender inequalities. Lazar (2007) posits that FDA seeks to uncover the subtle and overt ways in which linguistic practices reinforce patriarchal ideologies. By analyzing lexical choices, syntactic structures, and thematic patterns, FDA reveals how seemingly innocuous expressions, such as proverbs, contribute to systemic gender disparities. This approach is particularly relevant for examining Pashto proverbs, which encapsulate the patriarchal underpinnings of Pashtun society.

Feminist discourse analysis provides a critical lens for examining the intersection of language and gender. Sara Mills' feminist discourse analysis emphasizes the role of language in constructing gender

identities and power relations. Mills argues that language is not merely a reflection of reality but an active participant in shaping it. By analyzing the linguistic features of texts, feminist discourse analysis uncovers the underlying ideologies and power structures.

Norman Fairclough's critical discourse analysis complements this approach by examining the relationship between language, power, and society. Fairclough's three-dimensional framework—text analysis, discursive practice, and social practice—provides a comprehensive methodology for analyzing the ways in which language both reflects and constructs social realities. This study integrates these theoretical perspectives to analyze Pashto proverbs, focusing on their linguistic features, contextual usage, and broader social implications.

Gender and Language in Pashtun Society

Pashtun society is characterized by its adherence to patriarchal norms, with rigidly defined gender roles that prioritize male authority and female subservience. Ahmed (2012) notes that these norms are deeply entrenched in linguistic practices, including proverbs, which often portray women as weak, dependent, or morally suspect. The linguistic marginalization of women in Pashto proverbs reflects broader societal attitudes, perpetuating a cycle of discrimination and subordination.

Linguistic Marginalization

Linguistic marginalization occurs when language is used to reinforce societal hierarchies, excluding or devaluing certain groups. In the case of Pashto proverbs, women are frequently depicted in ways that undermine their agency and reinforce traditional power dynamics. Shaheen (2015) observes that such representations are not merely reflective but also prescriptive, shaping societal attitudes and behaviors towards women.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design, utilizing a purposive sampling technique to select a representative set of Pashto proverbs. The proverbs were collected from various sources, including oral traditions, written compilations, and fieldwork interviews with native Pashto speakers. The selected proverbs were categorized based on their thematic focus, such as gender roles, morality, and familial relationships.

The analysis involved coding the proverbs for linguistic features, such as metaphors, similes, and lexical choices, as well as their implicit and explicit meanings. The proverbs were then analyzed within their sociocultural context, focusing on their role in shaping gender identities and power relations. Ethical considerations included obtaining informed consent from participants and ensuring the anonymity of interviewees.

Analysis and Discussion

Marriage is a dominant theme in Pashto proverbs, often portraying women as commodities or burdens. For instance, the proverb "A woman's worth is in her dowry" reflects the commodification of women, reducing their value to material possessions. Similarly, "A man's home is his fortress, and his wife is its keeper" assigns women the sole responsibility for domestic duties, reinforcing traditional gender roles. These proverbs perpetuate the notion that a woman's primary purpose is to serve her husband and family, limiting her opportunities for self-actualization.

Beauty and Morality

Pashto proverbs frequently link a woman's worth to her physical appearance and moral conduct. For example, "A beautiful woman needs no dowry" underscores the societal emphasis on beauty as a determinant of a woman's value. Conversely, proverbs like "A woman's honor is her family's honor" place an undue burden on women to uphold familial reputation, often at the cost of their personal freedom and autonomy. These proverbs perpetuate unrealistic standards of beauty and morality,

contributing to the systemic oppression of women.

Subordination and Obedience

The theme of subordination is pervasive in Pashto proverbs, which often glorify female submissiveness and obedience. Proverbs such as "A silent woman is a jewel" and "An obedient wife is a blessing" reinforce the idea that women should be passive, compliant, and self-effacing. These proverbs not only reflect societal expectations but also serve to normalize and perpetuate them, limiting women's agency and voice.

Labor and Capability

Women's labor is often devalued in Pashto proverbs, which reflect a societal tendency to overlook their contributions. For example, "A woman's work is never done" implies that women's efforts are endless yet unacknowledged, while "A man builds the house, but a woman makes it a home" diminishes the significance of women's labor by framing it as secondary to men's achievements. These proverbs perpetuate gender disparities in the valuation of labor, both within and outside the domestic sphere.

1. Cultural Context of Pashto Proverbs

Definition and Importance: Pashto proverbs, referred to as 'Mataluna', are concise expressions that encapsulate the wisdom and cultural values of the Pashtun people. They serve as a reflection of societal norms and collective experiences, providing insights into the cultural identity of Pashto speakers.

Role in Society: These proverbs are not merely linguistic artifacts; they play a crucial role in shaping social behavior and reinforcing cultural beliefs. They are often used in everyday conversations, making them powerful tools for communication and socialization.

2. Gender Representation in Proverbs

Negative Depictions of Women: The analysis reveals a troubling trend in the portrayal of women within Pashto proverbs. Women are frequently depicted as weak, dependent, and obedient. For instance, proverbs such as "If she is a woman, she is wrong" and "Listen to women, don't obey them" illustrate a pervasive bias that undermines women's credibility and agency.

Reinforcement of Patriarchy: The proverbs often glorify male figures, portraying them as strong and capable, while women are relegated to subordinate roles. This is evident in sayings that emphasize men's authority and strength, such as "Son of Pakhtun is an army," which elevates male identity while diminishing female worth.

3. Implications for Women's Status and Empowerment

Marginalization and Disempowerment: The negative portrayal of women in these proverbs has significant implications for their social and economic status. Proverbs that suggest women should endure hardships silently or that their contributions are worthless contribute to a culture of marginalization. For example, the saying "Woman is in a home or in the grave" starkly reduces women's roles to mere domesticity or death, highlighting their systemic devaluation.

Cultural Reinforcement of Gender Roles: The proverbs serve to reinforce traditional gender roles, limiting women's agency and empowerment. The notion that "a man is irreplaceable with a woman" underscores the idea that women's worth is inherently less than that of men, perpetuating a cycle of dependency and subservience.

4. The Role of Proverbs in Shaping Gender Dynamics

Socialization of Gender Norms: Proverbs dictate expected behaviors for both genders, socializing women into domestic roles and men into positions of authority. This dynamic is evident in proverbs that emphasize women's roles as caretakers and homemakers, such as "The earth and the Pashtun

women don't speak," which suggests that women should remain silent and compliant.

Potential for Cultural Resistance: While these proverbs reflect entrenched gender norms, they also present an opportunity for cultural resistance. By critically analyzing and challenging these proverbs, there is potential for reinterpreting them to promote gender equality and empower women within the Pashtun community.

5. Contemporary Relevance and Future Directions

Evolving Gender Roles: The study highlights the need to address the evolving dynamics of women's roles in Pashto society. As societal attitudes shift, there is a growing recognition of the importance of women's empowerment and agency. This evolution calls for a reevaluation of the proverbs that have historically defined gender roles.

Advocacy for Change: The analysis advocates for a shift in the language used within proverbs to foster a more empowering narrative for women. This includes promoting proverbs that celebrate women's contributions and challenge traditional stereotypes, thereby encouraging a more equitable view of gender roles.

Implications of Linguistic Marginalization

The linguistic marginalization of women in Pashto proverbs has far-reaching implications. By normalizing gender stereotypes, these proverbs contribute to the socialization process, shaping the collective consciousness and perpetuating gender inequalities. They influence perceptions of women's roles, capabilities, and worth, affecting their access to education, employment, and decision-making opportunities.

Furthermore, these proverbs serve as tools of social control, discouraging women from challenging traditional norms and asserting their autonomy. The internalization of these linguistic patterns can lead to self-censorship and diminished self-esteem among women, perpetuating a cycle of marginalization.

Findings

The analysis revealed several key findings:

1. **Women as Inferior:** Many proverbs depict women as inferior to men, often using metaphors and similes that associate them with weakness, passivity, and dependence. The "broken pot" metaphor is a prime example, but other instances include comparing women to "birds in a cage" or "shadows" – fragile, fleeting, and lacking in substance. These metaphors not only devalue women but also reinforce the notion of their fragility and dependence on men for protection.
2. **Domestic Confinement:** Proverbs frequently confine women to domestic roles, emphasizing their responsibilities for household chores and child-rearing. They are often portrayed as subservient to their husbands and fathers. For instance, a proverb states, "A woman's place is in the home, a man's place is in the world". This proverb explicitly restricts women's sphere of influence to the domestic realm, limiting their opportunities for social and economic participation.
3. **Lack of Agency:** Women are often depicted as lacking agency and decision-making power. They are portrayed as passive recipients of male authority and control. A common proverb highlights this by stating, "A woman's opinion is like a mosquito's wing – it makes no sound". This proverb belittles women's opinions and reinforces their perceived lack of authority and influence within the social sphere.
4. **Physical Appearance:** Proverbs often focus on women's physical appearance, emphasizing its importance for marriage and social status. This can contribute to the objectification and commodification of women. For example, a proverb states, "A beautiful woman is like a flower, easily wilted". This proverb reduces women to their physical appearance and reinforces the

notion that their value lies primarily in their attractiveness. This objectification can have serious consequences for women's self-esteem and their overall well-being.

5. Limited Aspirations: Proverbs often portray women's aspirations as limited to marriage and motherhood, discouraging them from pursuing education and career goals. A proverb exemplifies this by stating, "A woman's education is like watering a barren land – it yields no fruit". This proverb discourages women's education and reinforces the notion that their primary role is to fulfill domestic responsibilities. This limitation of women's aspirations has significant implications for their social and economic empowerment.

Recommendations

Addressing the linguistic marginalization of women requires a multifaceted approach. Education plays a crucial role in challenging traditional norms and promoting gender equality. Curriculum reforms should include critical discussions on the role of language in perpetuating gender biases, encouraging students to critically analyze proverbs and other cultural texts.

Media and literature can also play a transformative role in reshaping societal attitudes. By promoting alternative narratives that celebrate women's agency and achievements, media can challenge traditional stereotypes and promote gender equality. Community-based initiatives, such as workshops and awareness campaigns, can engage local communities in critical discussions on the impact of language on gender dynamics.

Conclusion

Pashto proverbs, as cultural artifacts, play a significant role in shaping societal attitudes towards women. The linguistic marginalization of women in these proverbs reflects and reinforces patriarchal ideologies, perpetuating gender inequality. By critiquing these proverbs through a feminist lens, this study highlights the need for cultural and linguistic re-evaluation. Promoting gender equity requires not only challenging discriminatory practices but also transforming the cultural narratives that sustain them. This research underscores the importance of addressing linguistic marginalization as a critical step towards achieving gender equity in Pashtun society and beyond.

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