

On Sex Discrimination in Persian Proverbs

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Abstract—Proverbs are important part of a language and carrier of a culture. They reflect people's perspective and society systems. The discrimination and derogation against women in societies can be reflected in proverbs because they impact the social concepts greatly. By studying proverbs, the deep-rooted gender biased ideology in a society is observable. Persian is not a gender language, but studying 12,000 Persian proverbs through this research shows there are elements of oppression in some proverbs of this language which relate to women and violate the rights and dignity of them. 179 proverbs out of 12,000 ones include discrimination against both sexes. 84% of them include elements of semantic derogation against females and 16% include sex discrimination against males. Semantic derogation in Persian language shows women dominantly as: "evil and capricious", "The root of disasters" and "inferior and worthless" beings and men dominantly as "avaricious" absolutist and "cruel."

Index Terms—sex discrimination, semantic derogation, sexism, gender language, proverbs

I. INTRODUCTION

The study of language and gender has attractively considered in the past decades in the world, but research on language and gender in the Persian cultural world remained silent.

Social views and attitudes of people can be seen in language, and social phenomena as reflected in language. So language reflect different attitudes toward women (Wang, 2012, p. 150)

Language use is the evidence of the values and beliefs of that society and all kinds of unequal phenomena in the society including sex discrimination are bound to be shown in language. Studying Persian proverbs shows, females are defamed, laid and belittled in the position of being subordinate to males in Persian culture and society.

Proverbs are representative to be used to make a research on sex discrimination. They are short well-known phrases or sentences, which are usually the reflection of life. They are also a part of language and a kind of idiom which spread among the folks with popular image and rich significance (Ibid).

Researches on sex discrimination in Persian are rare, but in some other languages there are a lot of researches of this type. Here some of these studies are presented.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

OHA (1998) Studies Igbo¹ language, and shows that the representations of womanhood in Igbo proverbs are mainly negative: women are typically portrayed as being senseless, morally debased, devilish, childish, and weak. It's because of male-oriented rhetoric in Igbo proverbs that signify prejudice and hostility toward women in social discourse. The derogation of women in Igbo proverbs affects both the use of proverbs in the culture and male-female relationship in Igbo land.

Kehinde Yusuf (2002) compares semantic derogation in English and Yoruba languages and finds that the English language ignores women by allowing masculine terms to be used specifically to refer to males and generically to refer to human beings in general. Yoruba is like English sexist in some respects, and sexism in English has been imposed on some otherwise non-sexist aspects of Yoruba language, and that contact between the languages may have prevented the transfer of some sexist features of Standard English into Nigerian Pidgin English.

Fontecha and Catalan (2003) present a contrastive cognitive analysis of metaphorical usages of the word pair's fox / vixen and bull / cow, with their Spanish counterparts to find out whether these examples of animal metaphor are equally conceptualized in English and Spanish.

They reveal that there exists semantic derogation (imbalance) for women in both languages. In other words, in the collected metaphors, women are more negatively depicted than in the case of metaphors referring to men. Semantic derogation in the two pairs of animal words analyzed occurs more in terms referring to females than in those referring to males.

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¹ -Igbo language: native language of the Igbo people, an ethnic group primarily located in southeastern Nigeria.

Shen Dan (2008) studies Chinese language which is an ideographical and non-gender language. And mentions that this language express gender-related messages linguistically. Through analysis one can see that many Chinese metaphors bear negative sexual and moral overtones to describe women. It is noted that women are Called (bird) or (chick) when they are young and attractive, but when they are old, they are referred as (pig) or (dog). In Contrast, male Counterparts don't have such referring terms. It is obvious that linguistic discrimination still prevails in the current Chinese society.

Rodriguez (2009) shows in a comparative research that the speakers of English and Spanish often understand gender differences in terms of animal imagery. In both languages, metaphors presenting women in the guise of chickens, bitches or vixens. This offers a window on the role given to women in these societies which consider women as inferior and subordinated to men. Rodriguez states that man and woman are often conceptualized as animals of some sort in both languages.

Men are frequently referred to as studs, bucks, wolves, *toros* (bulls), *zorros* (foxes) and *lince*s (lynxes) whereas women are referred to with such metaphors as chick, bird, kitten, *pollita* (chicken) or *gatita* (kitten).

Balogun (2010) posits that there are elements of semantic derogation in some Yoruba proverbs which refer to women and violate their rights and that these proverbs are indicator of discrimination against women in Yoruba culture. This paper declares that many Yoruba proverbs clearly point to the oppression of women in Yoruba society, these proverbs are very offensive and oppressive and female referents feel humiliated by them.

Lixia and Eng (2012) explore snake metaphors across the two languages, English and Chinese, within the framework of conceptual metaphor theory to identify the existence of metaphors cross-linguistically.

They find out that when the gender of humans is taken into consideration, the specific conceptual metaphors generalized for the man and the woman from these two languages are different, and the snake metaphorical expressions have a much more derogative meaning for the man in Chinese but a more derogative meaning for the woman in English.

Wang (2012) reflects a study on Chinese and English proverbs to prove that these proverbs show deep-rooted gender biased ideology in society men are superior to women. Women are subordinate to men, men are stronger than women. Both of these languages include obvious discrimination and derogation to females, that is, subordinate and negative.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study surveys the incidence of sexism in the structure and use of Persian, and focuses on the semantics of female's subjugation and derogation in Persian proverbs. OHA (1998) defines proverbs as forms of figurative communication with didactic functions in studied conversations, which were found to possess evidences of male attempt at maintaining control over discourse in society.

The fact these stereotypes have been encoded in a form of communication usually respected and highly valued in Persian culture suggests the degree rhetoric in the society has been masculinized.

As it is mentioned, Persian is not a gender language, means a language that has grammatical gender to distinguish words between masculine, feminine, and /or neutral class. Lexical specification of a noun is specified as female-specific or male-specific (Hellinger & Bussmann, 2002, p. 5). But studying Persian proverbs shows that there are elements of sex discrimination in this language. Sex discrimination in most cases refers to the discrimination against females. It is prejudice against women on the basis of sex and because of the interconnections of language and reality; language is definitely sexually prejudiced against women (Wang, 2012, p.151).

This research analyses the existence of sex discrimination in Persian language through its proverbs and based on the definition of sexism, sexism in language in general comes in 3 major forms: language ignores women, it defines them as less significant than men, and it out rightly deprecates the female (Kehind Yusuf, 2002, p.8).

And on the definition of social gender, which has to do with stereotypical assumptions about what are appropriate social roles for women and men. It is a Category that refers to the socially imposed dichotomy of masculine and feminine roles and character traits (Kramarae & Treicher, 1985, p.173). In addition, sociolinguistics is the science which studies the relationship between language and society, between the use of language and social structures in which the users of language live (Wang, 2012, p.150).

In pursuing the objective of this study, data Comprising 151 Persian proverbs relating to womanhood and 28 proverbs relating to manhood were collected from the dictionary "14,000 Persian proverbs" (by Shakooreh zadeh). All the collected proverbs were analyzed semantically and each proverb was identified according to the sex of its user. In some cases, proverbs relating to womanhood or manhood were not used at all. Thus the collection of data was slightly prolonged, but it did not affect the objective of this study. Semantic analysis of the Persian proverbs shows that all of them should be categorized as face-threatening potential cases, not as non-face threatening or neutral ones for women, and face-threatening, neutral and praising for men (in this research the focus is on the face-threatening proverbs against men and women).

Through the study, the images of Iranian men and (strongly) women constructed along with showing sex differences between them to support the existence of sex discrimination against women by presenting female-related proverbs.

IV. ANALYSIS

As it is mentioned, there is an unbalance between the Persian proverbs referred to women and the ones referred to men. Such an unbalanced existence can be viewed as a fact that when people speak, they do not just utter linguistically, but speak culturally and ideologically too. West et al. (1997) believe that frozen expressions have been used for a long time and they surely have embodied fundamental collective beliefs and stereotypes.

Persian proverbs reflect gender-biased ideology in Iranian society.

Men are considered superior to women, women are subordinate to men, men are stronger and more talented than women. Men work out while women are in charge of housework. So Persian includes obvious discrimination and derogation to females, derogation in this research refers to works that convey negative, demeaning or sexual connotations.

This part illustrates sex discrimination against females in Persian proverbs in 25 aspects through 151 proverbs related to women.

As noted before for studying sex discrimination in Persian, 12,000 Persian proverbs were studied and analyzed, through which 151 proverbs include sex discrimination against females and obtain 25 negative and insulting characteristics attributed to women, the most frequent of them are "worthless and inferior", "evil and capricious" and "being the root of disasters."

Proverbs can be considered as a part of a cultural heritage of a language so studying them can reveal the views to man and woman in the ancient periods of the Persian societies.

The most frequent characteristic related to women through the Persian proverbs is "*worthless and inferior*". In other words, Persian language defines women as less significant than men and deprecates them. For example:

(I) "be xâne nešastan bovad k â-e zan" (L.T.² at home staying is the work of women)

(II) "bil-e čubi va pir-e zan bar ây-e ham zadan-e Halim³ xub-and" (L.T. shovel woody and old women for beating Halim good are)

Besides ignoring, obscuring and insulting women, as have been shown above, the Persian language defines women as less significant than men. Women are considered as consumers with no talent, strength and ability to do a significant carrier and are just created to do house-working.

"*Evil and capricious*" are other characteristics attributed to women through Persian proverbs, such as:

(I) "vaqti šeyt ân dar makr-e xod mim ânad be sor âq-e zan miravad."

(L.T. when Satan in trick his own gets stuck to near woman goes). This example shows women are not only not respected, but is humiliated and affronted by being considered as more wicked and filthy than the Satan, in a way that when Satan gets stuck in tricking and misleading human beings, goes to woman to get help and guidance!

Spender (1985, Pp.23-24) states that the semantic derogation of women fulfills a dual function: it helps to construct female inferiority and it helps to confirm it. In a society where women are devalued the words which refer to them assume negative connotations. But because the options for defining women are confined to negative terms, because their meanings are primarily those of minus male, women continue to be devalued.

A woman is also referred to as "*the root of disasters*", as in:

(i) "zan nad âri, qam nad âdri"

(L.T. wife not have, grief not have)

(ii) "marg-e zan hič kam az lezzat-e d âm âli nist!"

(L.T. Death of wife less than the enjoy of being a bridegroom is not!)

Both of these instances are used when a man wishes to indicate that the presence of a woman is the root of disasters and her absence the source of happiness and satisfaction.

It is often claimed that language is discriminatory against women, studying Persian proverbs proves this claim!

One of the most deprecating features of the Persian language is in the comparison of woman with animals like dog in *cruelty and rudeness*. These subordinate and negative characteristics are attributed to females through proverbs such as:

(i) "Zan-e salite sag-e bi qal âde ast"

(L.T. woman shrew dog without collar is)

Women are compared with **mule** and **dog** in annoying and having bad temper, with **scorpion** in rascality and sedition, such as: "Mâdar šohar aqrab-e zir-e farš ast" (L.T. The mother-in-law scorpion under the carpet is)

With **hen** in stupidity and folly, such as: "aql-e čehel zan be andâze yek morq-e si âh ast!" (L.T. the wisdom of forty women equal with a hen black is!)

With **donkey's tail** in unkindness: Such as: "bovad mehr-e zanân hamčon dom-e xar" (L.T. is kindness of women like the tail of donkey)

With **dog** in a way to consider women less than a dog in loyalty: In other words discrimination and derogation to females is shown in Persian proverbs by presenting women as *unaffectionate, unkind* and *unfaithful* beings.

Such as: "sag vaf âd ârad, nad ârad zan vaf â" (L.T. dog loyalty has, doesn't have woman loyalty)

With **cow** in fatness, such as: "mesl-e g âv-e čâq" (L.T. like a cow fat) however, this proverb can be used for both sexes, but convey more negative connotation when is used to refer to women. Most of the time this term is used by a man to express his disgust and sense of humiliation against a fat woman.

² -Halim: and Iranian food looks like soup.

³ -Literal translation

Wang (2012, p.150) believes that proverbs are small pieces of human wisdom that have been handed down from generation to generation. So in order not to transfer this unequal and biased wisdom to the future generations, the society has to undergo a revolution of reforming the language. Persian is not except and should be reformed to improve its inequality and bias against women.

In addition to the noted characteristics, women are known as ugly, untrustworthy and unreliable, inefficient and clumsy, selfish, talkative and gossipy, stingy, money lover, untidy, not virtuous, not grateful, liar, abusive and rude beings and also as some one who pretends to be better than in real is, and as someone having potential of doing devilish and repulsive actions.

Wang (2012, p.152) also states that sex discrimination proverbs provide a glimpse of the sex discrimination in reality, and they can be remembered easily and spread universally both in folk and society. In short, the sex discrimination proverbs influence the social concept and social role deeply and reinforce the gender bias in reality.

Studying Persian proverbs proves that superior and positive rigid verbal stereotypes attribute to men, whereas the inferior and negative ones attribute to women. But, although, to be linked with male is to be linked to a range of meanings which are positive and good, there are some Persian proverbs which show sex discrimination against men. The number of these proverbs is much fewer than the ones which show semantic derogation against women, and also fewer than the proverbs which are used to praise, applause, appreciate, esteem and thank the men.

As Dan (2008) states, language is so socially constitutive, it therefore gives rise to important issues its power and function setting up influential ideological effects. So language use can help produce unequal power relations between gender categories.

So power asymmetry can be realized through the unequal representation and positioning of men and women in different status. And language may be sexist passing off conventional beliefs and prejudice.

People need to address each other as a daily practice and it is difficult to avoid categorizing each other by gender when doing so. This topic is very important and hot in the sociolinguistic area.

This part focuses on the semantics of male subjugation and derogation in Persian proverbs. Although as it was mentioned, Persian proverbs as forms of figurative Communication with didactic functions are found to possess evidences of male attempt at maintaining control over discourse in society. In other words, Persian has a kind of male-dominated culture and it affected on the Persian language and cause the proverbs signify prejudice and hostility toward women in social discourse.

Studying Persian proverbs shows there are 28 fixed expressions including sex discrimination against Male, through which 15 negative characteristics are attributed to men, the most dominant of them are avaricious, absolutist and cruel.

Although it is very difficult to range the degree of negative features, analyzing the concerned proverbs reveal that the most frequent negative characteristics attributed to men tend in fact to applaud them covertly. In other words, when Persian proverbs present a man as cruel, avaricious absolutist, self-conceit, lazy and self-indulgent, avenger, and one who breaks his promise, tend to describe him as strong, powerful, audacious, determined, un wavering and awe-inspiring being who is free and out of any one's control and known culturally and socially as the protector and supporter of a family.

Here some Persian proverbs including semantic derogation against men are represented.

"be x âter-e m âl-e donyâ barâdar çešm-e bar âdar r âdar mi?âvarad" (L.T. for the wealth of the world brother eye of brother takes out).

This example refers to the *avaricious* of men, though we can consider the word "brother" in it the same as the pronoun "man" in general addressing all beings, including both sexes.

Because the tendency and desire for over ambition and amassing wealth exist naturally in all human beings, and being avaricious is a common feature between man and woman, and also there are some proverbs with the same content referring to females.

Another term which reflects the male-Centeredness of the Persian language is being "*Cruel*". "n ân-e šuy dandân d ârad" (L.T. Bread of the husband tooth has).

This illustrates that man is the supporter of his family and provide for their expenses, and his family are all indebted to him.

Among Persian proverbs, one of the most frequent in use example is "tonbân-e mard ke do tâ šod, fekr-e zan-e no mi?oftad" (L.T. trousers of the man that double become, thought a woman new fall into).

Again the reason of existence of such proverbs should be sleeked in the culture and religion of Persian society, which grants an absolute authority to men to do as their wish and impose easily their decisions upon women.

The usage of such metaphorical expression, which means: when a man becomes rich, he will think of remarrying (not have the capacity of being wealthy), shows women's aversion, disgust and critique against social unbalance and unfairness.

Some proverbs reinforce the belief that males are the central important members of the dominant group and provoke them to be furious and coarse in order not to be called "*a person with no prejudice*." For example: "qeyrat-e mard-i nad âri zan max âh" (L.T. Prejudice of man kind don't have, wife don't want). It seems necessary to mention that "having prejudice" for men has positive connotation in Persian culture and not having it toward women is a fault and will cause critique against males.

Persian language and culture also provoke men to be dictator, ignore their wives' opinions and ideas and not consult with them in any important issues, in order not to be called "*inefficient*" and one who is under his wife control.

For example: "v ây bar mard-i ke az zan kam-tar ast" (L.T. shame on the man who than the woman less is)

Arouse and advice those to be courageous, stable and strong in some proverbs and to have a firm will power to keep their promise in some others. Through these proverbs women are directly or indirectly insulted and humiliated.

"zahr-e mard ân nad âri, çon zanân dar xâne baš" (L.T. courageous of men don't have, like the women in house be).

"Mard-i ke ahd mišekanad kam-tar az zan ast" (L.T. a man who promise break, less than a woman is)

As it is seen, in order to advice men through Persian proverbs, females will be degraded.

Other characteristic attributed to Men through Persian proverbs are as followed: *self-conceit* and *proud, lazy, avenger* and *short-conceit*.

The preceding discussion seems to confirm that the Persian proverbs emphasize male positive images or stress male-dominance over females. But they tend to depict a negative image of the women.

In most of the proverbs women are subject to lower and humble social positions who are overpowered by men. The discriminating proverbs show the dominant social norms and rules which are concerning the behaviors and roles of men and women in a male-dominated society. So the remaining phenomenon of male priority and female subordinate in Persian culture is not surprising at all.

V. CONCLUSION

Gender discrimination in language come from different dimensions, but discrimination and derogation are usually covert and difficult to be noticed without conscious awareness.

Proverbs can be considered as the essence of language and a mirror of reality, so they can reflect people's views, values, attitudes, behaviors or systems of the society.

Language and reality are interact and related closely. Reality effects and forms Language and language reflects and impacts reality.

Persian is not a gender language but there exist gender inequality and sex discrimination in this language, which is harmful. Because gender-related representations can perpetuate stereotyped roles and reinforce biased attitudes towards women.

There is a dualistic view of men in Persian proverbs: the positive and negative (which the positive view is the focused one). The positive dimension shows the promotion of face for man as could be seen in most of the proverbs related to males, in order to show men as strong, powerful, talented, hard-working, mighty, dominant and sometimes as cruel, absolutist and avaricious beings in Persian culture and society.

It is important to be noted that Persian like the English language ignores women by allowing masculine terms to be used specifically to refer to males and to refer to human beings in general. For example: "Mard bâ'ad ke eyb-e xod binad" (L.T. Man should fault his own sees), in this example "Man" refers to people in general, ignoring of its sex.

But, there is a negative face for women in Persian proverbs. An offensive, insulting, humiliating and degrading view to show women as inferior, weak, evil, capricious and worthless beings who are the root of disasters!

Sexism in Persian is clear and semantic derogation and discrimination against women is obvious. There are totally 179 Persian proverbs which include discrimination against both sexes, out of which 84% related to females and only 16% related to males.

This discrimination against women can be dangerous, because the language remembers its users to humiliate females and prevent them of having some social roles and jobs. This matter can be more crucial with the growing activities of feminists all around the world in modern societies.

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