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## Images Of Women In English Proverbs

Mr. Umesh K. Rathod

Asst. Prof. Dept. of English, Sundarrao Solanke Mahavidyalaya Majalgaon Dist. Beed.

Dr Balaji A. Navle

Asso. Prof and Head, Dept. Of English, Shri Muktanand Collage Gangapur Dist. Aurangabad.

### Introduction :

Proverbs are précised and condensed saying frequently used that express general truths or practical precepts. They have their origins in oral tradition and tend to change little from generation to generation. Being transmitters and reflectors of accumulated wisdom, they are generally accepted blindly; and are a manifestation of the traditional values of a society. The present research is a sociolinguistic and critical discourse analysis of proverbs of English. Data for the present research is taken from English dictionary of proverbs. Data has been categorized and analyzed to examine how women is perceived, symbolized and portrayed through English proverbs. It is also examined whether the stereotypical image of the woman is in English proverbs. It is expected that the paper would help in a better understanding of the image of woman as presented through the accumulated wisdom of English proverbs.

### What is a proverb?

Online Oxford Dictionaries define a proverb as "A Short, well-known pithy saying, starting a general truth or piece of advice"; whereas Collins English Dictionary defines it as "a short, memorable, and often highly condensed saying embodying, esp. with bold imagery, some commonplace fact or experience". As far as the origin of the word 'proverb' is concerned it is from "Middle English: from Old French proverb, from Latin *proverbium*, from *pro-*(put) forth + *verbum* (word).

Since proverbs are very closely associated with cultures, it would be appropriate here to see how proverbs are defined in the cultural context. The New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy (Third Edition, 2002) defines proverbs as short, pithy sayings that reflect the accumulated wisdom, prejudices, and superstitions of the human race". In this definition use of the words "prejudices" and "superstitions" is crucially important; and later on the analysis of the data of the current research will show human prejudices and superstitions are reflected in the proverbs of different languages.

### Important characteristics and common features of proverbs :

"There is no generally accepted definition which covers all specifics of the proverbial genre" (Grzybek, 1994, p.227). However, based on various definitions of proverbs one can derive some important characteristics and common features of proverbs. A very important common feature of proverbs is that they are originated in oral tradition. Since they come from an oral tradition, and for centuries they are not recorded in the written form, they are designed or worded in such a way that a layman can remember or memorize them easily. Interestingly for centuries they are carried from heart to heart and generation to generation without even changing a single word. It is due to this characteristic that they are generally considered a prestigious genre that is the custodian of common man's wisdom. Proverbs often have such grammatical features and rhetorical devices that make

them easy to remember that is why the use of alliteration, rhyme, repetition and use of parallel structures are found as common features of proverbs across the globe.

### Sources of the spread of proverbs :

Mieder (2008, p.14) asserts, "Proverbs, like riddles, jokes or fairy tales, do not fall out of the sky and neither are they products of a mythical soul of the folk. Instead they are always coined by an individual either intentionally or unintentionally ..." Mieder (2008) has identified four sources that played a vital role in the distribution and spread of European proverbs, and that can be generalized to other cultures of the world such as Asian and African. According to him the first source is Greek and Roman antiquity whose wisdom spread through proverb mainly in Latin language. He asserts that the study of proverbs started with Aristotle, and mentions the bible as the second source, Medieval Latin as lingua franca the third, and modern texts as the fourth source. Thus, proverbs spread in different cultures through antiquity, classical languages, religious text sources, modern texts etc.

### Representation of women in different societies: proverbs in different languages:

"Values and beliefs are codified and manifested in all aspects of linguistic communication, such as popular expressions, shared vocabulary, oral traditions, conversational rules and modes of interaction, and even linguistic modes of creativity" (Dominguez, 2010, p.50). Thus proverbs also reflect social beliefs regarding gender; and by looking at the proverbs in a particular language or in a particular culture one can understand how gender is perceived in that culture. For example a Rajasthani proverb asserts "When a girl is born, don't take care of her, she will grow like a cactus; when a boy is born, take good care of him, as you would with a rose tree" (Schipper, 2010, p.31).

Schipper (2010, p.31) asserts, "The basic themes of proverbs are derived from elementary human experience and activities. Through the body human



beings express how we feel and who we are-or at least who we are allowed to be in the midst of the social pressure we all suffer to a larger or smaller extent-in the cultural context we live in". He further argues, "However, even in reference to body how gender identity comes in, and how patriarchy plays its role can be clearly observed in the Dutch proverb: A good woman goes without head" (Schipper,2010,p.37). What this Dutch proverb conveys is to have a head implies to have brains, to be intelligent, to have one's own will; but a woman is not expected to be a rational creature. According to (Schipper,2010p.37) "Tvambo in Angola and Namibia refer more explicitly to the consequences for girls of this type: 'A girl of a will of her own will not get marred'".

In proverbs "Women are mostly associated with beauty, and men with intelligence" (Schipper,2010,p.41). The notion that women have no brains is presented in the proverbs of many languages and cultures across the globe as he gives the examples: "More beauty than peacock, but the intelligence of a block of wood' (Mangolian); 'A doll's head and an empty brain '(Polish)" (p 41)and "Women are wacky, women are vain; they'd rather be pretty than have a good brain (English, USA)" (p.79). He also refers to an Arabic saying that "Women have only half a brain"(p41). As far as Urdu is concerned it too has the same idea presented in proverbs for example "*aurat naqis-ul-aqal hoti hai*" (A woman has flawed wisdom).

#### **Categorization of data for analysis :**

Since the current research was to investigate how woman are presented, to facilitate the analysis of data the following categories were developed:

1. Women as negatively beautiful, fragile and incapable.
2. Women as unintelligent and talkative.
3. Women as degraded and immoral objects of satisfaction.
4. Women as troublesome, untrustworthy, deceitful and willful.

#### **Results and discussion:**

1. Beauty draws more than oxen.
2. A man is as old as he feels, and a woman as old as she looks.
3. Woman and a cherry are painted for their own harm.
4. A woman and a glass are ever in danger.
5. A woman is flax, man is fire, the devil comes and blows the bellows.
6. A woman kissed is the weaker vessel
7. A woman kissed is half won.
8. A woman's tongue wags like a lamb's tale.
9. Where there are women and geese there wants no noise.
10. A woman that loves to be at the window, is like a bunch of grapes on the highway.
11. Women have no souls.
12. All women may be won.
13. Marry your daughters betimes, less they marry themselves.

14. Marry your son when you will, your daughter when you can.
15. Mother-in-law and daughter-in-law are a tempest and a hailstorm.

A close analysis of the data of this category shows that in English proverbs the beauty and looks of women are referred to in a derogatory way. Whether the claim is that "beauty draws more than oxen" or the to her extreme" woman and a cherry are painted for their own harm" perspective remains the same: beauty and looks of women have an unpleasant if not negative connotation attached to them. Women are not only presented as objects of beauty, they also are projected as weak and fragile. This fragility is shown to be of different dimensions such as a woman being a "weaker vessel"; she is weak to the extent that she is half won with a single kiss. It is also interesting that in the relationship of a man and a woman if there is something that goes wrong (if the devil plays its role) it is the weak woman who is 'flax' that can melt easy or catch fire whereas man is 'fire' who exercise his power over the powerless woman.

A keen analysis of the data shows that women are presented as unintelligent and uselessly talkative. A woman is insufficiently wise to seek answers from. Further, by asserting "where there are women and geese there wants no noise" women are downgraded to the level of birds, and their talk to the level of meaningless noise of birds. The criticism becomes very crude when it is claimed "A woman's tongue wags like a lam's tale". A woman "is like a bunch of grapes on the highway" that anybody can have access to; and especially if a woman wears makeup the purpose is to announce "that she is to be let". In a very derogatory way she is brought down to the level of objects when she is equated with churches and wool. The degradation goes to the extent of claiming, "Women have no souls". A woman is equated to evil and she is worse than devil. It is advised to marry them as soon as you can, lest they marry themselves thus, they are denied the right to marry as per their accord. Even after marriage they are terrible and disastrous: "Mother-in-law and daughter-in-law are a tempest and a hailstorm".

#### **Conclusion :**

During the last few decades images of women in proverbs has undoubtedly emerged as one of the significant themes in the area of social research. Linguists, cultural historian, anthropologists, folklorists, and philologists have been exploring women issues from the perspectives of their disciplines. The current study is on the construction of women stereotypes in English. In all the proverbs of English women are presented as negatively beautiful, fragile, unintelligent and talkative. They are considered troublesome and untrustworthy and

are projected as degraded and immoral objects of satisfaction.

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