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**| RESEARCH ARTICLE**

**Depiction of Women in Arabic Proverbs: Pragma-Discoursal Analysis**

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**| ABSTRACT**

This study investigates women's representation in Arabic proverbs, specifically those from Palestinian, Omani, Yamani, and Sudanese cultures, to answer the following questions: (1) Do these proverbs usually depict women as having low status? (2) What linguistic techniques are used in these proverbs the most frequently? (3) How is the intersection between critical discourse analysis and pragmatics manifested in these proverbs? (4) What are the most common character traits attributed to women in these proverbs? The study applied a descriptive method in its analysis of 106 Arabic proverbs from the Sudanese, Omani, Yamani and Palestinian cultures. First, it was determined whether all of the proverbs reflected poor status for women. Second, a linguistic configuration was performed in addition to focusing on the functions of pragmatics and discourse analysis to identify the most prominent linguistic and pragmatic patterns and their associated interpretations. Third, the numbers and percentages of positive and negative traits were calculated. The study comes to the conclusion most of the Arabic proverbs depict low status for women. Lexical cohesion, rhyme, lexemes and feminine anthroponyms are the most common linguistic tactics utilized in proverbs. Negative proverbs are more common than positive ones in their depiction of women's representation, and the common attributes attributed to women in proverbs are being unfocused, wicked and ill-natured. In fact, this study demonstrates how the language of proverbs reflects women's inferiority compared to men in earlier cultures.

**| KEYWORDS**

Pragmatics, proverbs, power, ideology, lexical cohesion, critical discourse analysis

**| ARTICLE INFORMATION**

**ACCEPTED:** 02 August 2023

**PUBLISHED:** 13 August 2023

**DOI:** 10.32996/jpda.2023.2.2.1

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**1. Introduction**

In Hebrew, the word "proverb" originally meant "paralleled" or "similar," whereas, in Greek, it meant "crafty sayings combining similes and parallels." They are renowned for being easily recalled and repeated words with sharp language that gets the idea across. The spread of proverbs throughout Europe was aided by the Bible and medieval Latin. The Arabian culture is one of those societies whose proverbs served as a primary means of communication and a component of their cultural history.

Proverbs are notable for coming from an oral tradition and being written in a way that makes it simple for laymen to remember them decades after they were first spoken without altering a single word. This is the outcome of the use of lexemes and markers. Proverbs can be divided into six categories: those that express a general attitude toward life and the laws that govern it, those that are ethical and recommend certain virtues while denouncing certain vices, those that express a system of values, those that express general truths and observations about life and human nature, those that are humorous and those that express specific realities to a particular area. In the current study, the category of proverbs that communicate a system of values was chosen to be analyzed, specifically those that symbolize women in Arabic cultures.

This study supports the (Yksel, 1993) statement that "proverbs strive to transmit knowledge, but what they actually do is to "brain-wash" individuals using generalizations. ( p.66 ). Even if Arab societies are changing more and women are becoming more

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intelligent, educated, and active participants in all aspects of daily life, some of the younger generations still hold onto the unfavorable preconceptions that were passed down from their parents and take them for granted.

## **2. Literature Review**

The study of proverbs has been an area of interest to researchers since they provide a general view of life and serve as indicators of folk wisdom.

(Ambu-Saidi, 2012) examined feminine markers, the use of lexemes that specifically relate to women, and the use of feminine onomastics in negative proverbs to provide a linguistic analysis of Omani proverbs. She conducted a qualitative analysis of proverbs gathered from written sources using two books of Omani proverbs and discovered that the majority of proverbs with a feminine identifier have derogatory interpretations that emphasize women's inferiority. In order to learn more about how the participants recognized the proverbs and understood their meanings, she also created a questionnaire with a representative sample of proverbs with negative implications. She came to the conclusion that young people's perspectives may alter depending on their extent of exposure to other genders.

Another study that is connected to this one is that of (Rasul, 2015), which looked at how gender stereotypes are constructed in English and Urdu proverbs. A compilation of Urdu proverbs and the Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs were used to gather the data. She arranged the proverbs into several categories. Proverbs in both English and Urdu portray women as submissive, inferior and weak.

(Belfatimi, 2013) investigated the image of women in Moroccan proverbs. She gathered information online and through Moroccan Arabic books that discuss women's issues. The proverbs were grouped into categories based on numerous "beginning from home" themes that are essential to understanding gender disparities. She discovered that proverbs upheld views that gave men stronger roles in matters of dominance and government and placed women in a lower position.

"Gender difference is not a concern as far as not giving birth to gender inequality," according to Mubarok (2017, p. 138). In an effort to analyze traditional views on the perceptions and roles of women in Sudanese society, he looked into the interactions between language, gender, and culture by employing a feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA) methodology. He examined seven proverbs from Sudan about women that were chosen from written sources. This study demonstrated that "women are constructed as submissive who must obey their husbands," according to Mubarok (2017, p. 137).

The use of language to intentionally foster inequality and difference between men and women was emphasized in (Poynton, 1986) book *Language and Gender: Making the Difference*. Poynton paid close attention to the grammatical and textual construction of both spoken and written words.

Islam elevated the status of women, according to (Hekmat, 1997) in his book *Women and the Koran: The Status of Women in Islam*. Modern writers argue that Islam does a good job of recognizing and protecting women's rights. By utilizing various proverbs that have negative implications regarding women, the book sought to demonstrate how women are still subjected to humiliation, abasement, mistreatment, and disregard in Islamic nations

## **3. Theoretical framework**

This study follows the theory of (Bergman and Elizabeth M.1992) for proverbial talks. It also applies a critical discourse analysis with the aid of pragmatics to analyze how stereotypes about women and positioning are pictured in the proverbs.

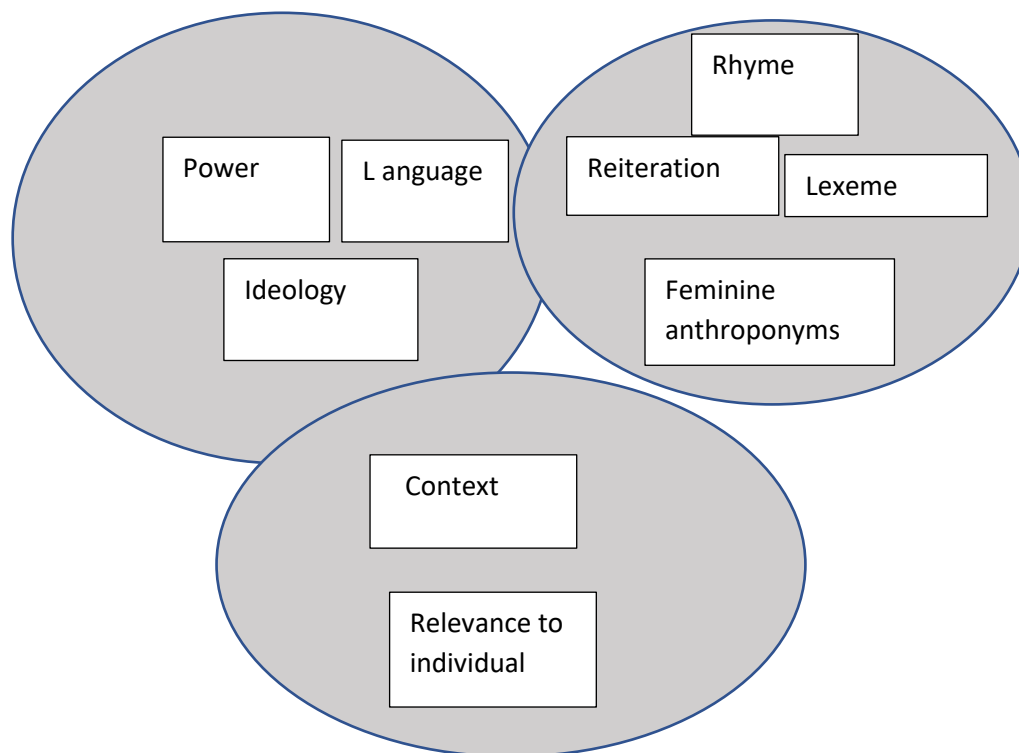


Figure 1: Theoretical Framework of the study

According to (Bergman, Elizabeth M.1992), grammatical and linguistic structures in proverbs differ from those in non-proverbial talks. These variations may offer a set of patterns for the creation of proverbs. *Reiteration* is a type of lexical cohesion that includes using a lexical item repeatedly at one end of the scale, using a general word to refer back to a lexical item at the other end of the scale, and a variety of other things in between, such as the use of a synonym or nearly-synonym, superordinate language, Halliday and Hasan (1976: 278). In order to establish structure and aid in memorizing, similar-sounding words are repeated; a *rhyme* is employed. Feminine lexemes, feminine markers, and feminine onomastics could effectively correspond to and represent women in proverbs. *Feminine lexemes* are the basic abstract units of meaning that correspond to and represent women. *Feminine markers* are syntactic particles that categorize words or phrases as womanly-related, while *feminine anthroponyms* refer to female proper nouns, both individual and collective.

Given that critical discourse analysis primarily deals with notions of the connection between language, power, and ideology, the classification of women's roles and any potential subordination of women could be explored with direct reference to CDA. Hegemonic femininity, according to one of the field's pioneers (Schipper, 2007), entails traits that are traditionally associated with women and that, when combined with hegemonic masculinity, create a hierarchical and complementary connection that ensures men's dominance over women.

Proverbs and pragmatics should be the subject of two discussions. The interlocutors must share a common interest for the proverb to be clearly understood. When a hearer hears a proverb, he makes several assumptions in his head. If he is familiar with the proverb, there will be no doubts as to what the listener and speaker are thinking. However, when proverbs are unknown, the hearer may move on to the context to confirm that his first assumption was correct. Sperber and Wilson, (2002) referred to this process in their Relevance Theory.

#### 4. Methodology

One hundred and six Arabic proverbs were collected from various online articles, blogs and other sources that show interest in investigating women's representation in folklore. Only eighteen Palestinian proverbs were collected directly from an eighty-year old Palestinian woman.

##### 4.1 Reflecting the low status of women

To determine whether all the proverbs in this study represent the low status of women, every proverb was evaluated. Nine Moroccan and Palestinian proverbs, out of a total of one hundred and six, did not refer to women as being inferior.

Concerning the Palestinian proverbs, women are given a high status equivalent to that given to men. In the proverb *اللي أمه في البيت يوكل خبز و زيت* (he whose mother is still at home should eat bread and oil), the Palestinian mother is represented as the source of grace in every house for her crucial role in taking care of children. In the proverb *مخبية البنت المربية درة* (the virtuous lady is like a precious stone), a high status is given to courteous ladies who are described as precious stones. In a surprising manner, the proverb *المليحة بتعمل من الهامل زلما* (a good woman makes a bad man a good one) gives women a higher status than men in the sense that women are able to make their bad husbands or sons good ones.

Examining the Moroccan proverbs showed that women are elevated in domestic spheres and beauty. In the proverb *المره هي قفل البيت* (woman in her house is like a key to a door), woman is seen as the person on whom all responsibilities are put, and without her, there wouldn't be a happy family. In the proverb *مولات الدار عمارة لو كانت حمارة* (housewives are good even if they are actually not), women are always considered good housewives even if some of them have proved the contrary. In the proverb *المره الزوينة تستاهل تهوزن المدينة* (beautiful woman deserves to role a city); beauty features of women enable them to role a city ignoring their qualifications or whether they are knowledgeable and wise. A man will be always remembered by people in case he has daughters, not sons. An example is the proverb *اللي خلف البنات ما مات* (he who has daughters will never die). In the proverb *ما يرتاح الرجل من همه* (The girls' father is gracious), the father of daughters is lucky and blessed. In the proverb *حتى يلقي المره اللي تلمه* (men won't feel at rest until he marries), women are tasked with improving and fostering peace in their husbands' lives.

#### **4.2 Common linguistic techniques used in proverbs**

There are various linguistic strategies employed in Arabic proverbs that collaborate with the presentation and reference to women.

The first of these is a feminine marker that can be represented in numerous ways as a suffix or a prefix, such as the following:

راحت تطحن وعرست : /ت-/  
الحرمة شاورها ها و خالها : /ها-/  
و حذارك منهن عند بلوغهن و عند قطوعهن : /هن-/  
الحريم محرومات العقل : /ت-/  
المره المليحة (good woman) in

The proverbs also included several lexemes that dealt with how women are referred to; some examples are: The lexeme *الحريم* (women) in *محرومات العقل* The lexeme *المره* (woman) in *قفل البيت* The lexeme *المليحة* (good woman) in *المليحة بتعمل من الهامل زلما*

Additionally, the proverbs incorporated feminine anthroponyms as the use of the name *حليمة* (Halima) in the Omani proverb *عادت حليمة لعادتها القديمة*.

Regarding sound features, some proverbs contain rhyme, which makes them simpler to remember and transmit through generations. Such examples are the rhyme between the two words *حليمة* and *القديمة* in the proverb *عادت حليمة لعادتها القديمة* and the words *دولاب* and *ج الب* in the proverb *المره دولاب والرجل ج الب*

In the bulk of the proverbs, reiteration proved to be an effective lexical cohesion element. It was achieved through the use of antonyms and repetition. Antonyms achieved the sense of opposition at the level of verbs, nouns and adjectives, as the following examples show:

*شاورها* و *خالها* (consult your wife, then disregard her) *توكل مال الزوج* و *وتحن للمطلق* (although she spends her husband's money, she still pines for her ex-husband)  
*مولات الدار عمارة* لو كانت *حمارة* (housewives are good even if they are not)

Specific structures and words were repeated to get the desired effect of the language's intensity when describing and positioning women. Some examples but not limited to are :

*طنحرتها* عالنار و عينها على *طنحرة* جارتها  
ليك *البنات* *تنتت* و أرخت *جدايها*  
*زين* *زينة* و العقل *نشره*

#### **4.3 CDA, pragmatics and women's representation in Arabic proverbs**

The present study's extensive linguistic analysis of the proverbs indicates that power and ideology invariably have an impact on their linguistic elements. Examining 97 proverbs in which women were given low status compared to men was done with the

understanding that one theme of the field of critical discourse analysis is focusing on criticizing unequal gender relations in which women are frequently humiliated and given a lower status than that given to men.

Theme	Examples
Valuing marriage of young women	إن طالت بارت البنّت إما رجلها وإما قبرها
Personal traits ( ill natured, evil and dumb)	تخلي من الحبة قبة المرّة برقع عقق ل المرّة أفعى و محزّمة إبليس الي يعمله إبليس في عام تعمله العجوز في ساعة
Work	يوم ما عرفت تلعب قالت الملعب ديق من قل حيلها رغت البنّت بتاكل ما تشبع و تخدم ما تقنع
Violence against women	أضرب المرّة ترتاح المرّة اللي ماكلّتش العصا من الأحد للأحد تقول ما قدها أحد

Table 1: Main themes in which women were represented in proverbs

It was discovered that men's behavior toward them and the issues of marriage and the work all establish women's subjugation. It was a widely held assumption that a woman is more suited to marriage and domestic duties the younger she is. In short, marriage and taking care of family are the goals for which girls are prepared since birth; one proverb stipulated that women should either get married or pass away. This was also mentioned in a large number of proverbs that portrayed women as being dependent on males and unable to handle the majority of demanding activities. Additionally, women were associated with traditional negative behaviors such as being extremely meek, having "quarter or half a brain", and submissive to the point of getting struck by their men. They were also seen as representing dark and demonic forces. The thought of presenting them as Evil is even more astounding. This is a result of their marginalization; it has been hypothesized that they made friends with demons and joined the devilish community. Snakes are another image used to describe women. Ladies, especially elderly women, were once perceived by men as a menace and a danger.

Proverbs need to be understood by the listeners in order for them to be effective. When someone hears a proverb, they form a multitude of presumptions in their minds. If the proverb is straightforward and doesn't contain terms having more than one meaning, like in *المرّة بتتعب أهلها لو ماتت* (If a lady is dead, her family will experience problems because of her), the hearer and the speaker will share the same understanding of what is being said. However, it might be challenging to deduce the meaning of foreign and complex proverbs like in *المرّة بيدقوها بأختها* and draw the conclusion that in Sudanese society, a lady is punished by getting her sister engaged.

In some proverbs, the hearer may then turn to the proverbial context to confirm that the assumption he had previously formed is accurate and accepted. For instance, in the Omani proverb *جالسة في الكلة وحسها ورا الحلة*, the hearer rejects the literal meaning and searches for another context in which the proverb could make more sense (She is sitting with everyone, but her thoughts with another one. Sperber and Wilson, (2004) referred to this process as the Relevance Theory. It is important to note that proverb listeners and readers almost never forget to use context when trying to understand the proverb at hand. The majority of the proverbs discussed in this study call for readers or listeners to consider the context in order to more fully comprehend the message being expressed.

#### 4.4 Most frequent attributes given to women in Proverbs

In order to find the frequent attributes assigned to women, all proverbs were carefully translated and then categorized under a number of themes. Their occurrences and percentages were next calculated. Finally, the results were put in the following table.

Attributes	Number of occurrences	Percentage of occurrences
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Talkativeness and exaggeration	5	5%
Wickedness, envy and refusing to help others	14	14%
Being empty-headed	5	5%
Getting old to be called "spinster" and encouraging girls to get married	8	8%
Beauty	5	5%
Being superficial, ungrateful and wasteful	7	7%
Being unfocused in doing tasks	19	19%
Ill nature that affects men	18	18%
Being humiliated	3	3%
Being virtuous, a good housewife with a good effect on husband	9	9%
Being weak and inferior	13	13%

Table(2): Percentages of attributes given to women in proverbs

It was concluded that the most common negative attributes given to women are : (1) being unfocused in doing tasks, (2) ill - nature that affects men, particularly the husband, by being a liar and not loyal to him, (3)wickedness, envy and refusing to help others and being weak and inferior.

**5. Results**

The study's main objective was to illustrate how women are portrayed in Arabic proverbs using linguistic, pragmatic, and critical discourse analysis approaches. To achieve this, it was necessary to look at whether or not all proverbs accorded women low rank and to look at common linguistic strategies that gave rise to the proverbs. In order to identify the prevalent characteristics attributed to women, critical discourse analysis and pragmatics were also examined.

Most of the proverbs assigned women low status; 97 out of 106 proverbs pictured women as talkative, wicked, dumb, wasteful, superficial, ill-natured and weak. Only nine proverbs elevated women by describing her beauty, her role in managing her household affairs and her support of her father and her husband; women were mostly described using words like "virtuous," "good," "beautiful," and "home."

Proverbs were also rich with linguistic methods that helped make women stand out and be described efficiently. These included feminine markers; suffixes and prefixes, lexemes, feminine anthroponyms, rhyme reiteration; repetition and antonyms.

The useful and fruitful link between critical discourse analysis and pragmatics obviously showed how language, being related to its social context, is also affected by its use contexts. Beside the linguistic variation that the proverbs have, people can perceive the inferred meaning that some complex proverbs carry depending on the proverbial context and their hidden ideologies, which are supported by the unequal hegemony in which men mostly have dominating positions while women are subordinated. This also ensures that these controlling preconceptions will endure over time and be passed on to future generations.

**6. Conclusion**

The study sought to determine whether the proverbs' typical portrayals of women as having low status by looking into the most common language devices and character traits used, as well as by defining the relationship between CDA and pragmatics.

Most of the proverbs gave women a low rank by using a variety of language devices, including feminine markers, lexemes, feminine anthroponyms, rhyme, and reiteration; they also painted women as chatty, wasteful, dumb, ill-mannered, and feeble. The study unequivocally demonstrated the value of the relationship between CDA and pragmatics in demonstrating how the language of proverbs is primarily influenced by their social context. Indeed, looking at the proverbs through the lens of critical discourse analysis helped to reveal the societies' harmful underlying ideologies.

The study confirms that women continue to be portrayed as less valuable, helpless and dependent members of society by utilizing the theories of (Bergman and Elizabeth M.1992), (Sperber and Wilson, 2002), Relevance Theory, and comprehension of critical discourse analysis approach. This study urges encouraging societal change for the better and making use of the set of grammatical and linguistic patterns recommended for the construction of proverbs that depict women favorably.

The results of this study have to be seen in light of some limitations. A greater sample size would increase the accuracy of the results. The majority of proverbs, however, confirmed that women are typically portrayed unfavorably. Due to time and place restrictions, access to respondents of other nationalities besides Palestinians was also restricted. However, the sample was homogeneous and included a range of proverbs from Palestine, Sudan, Yemen, and Oman. It is advised that more proverbs be collected as a sample for future research and that respondents from the Omani, Sudanese, and Yemeni cultures be questioned.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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**Publisher's Note:** All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers.

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