

**Psychological Impact of the Gender Related Proverbs on the
Life of Pashtun Woman: An Analysis in the Light of
Foucault’s Concept of Power and Knowledge
DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.8122899**



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ABSTRACT

Proverbs as a significant genre of the folklore and as a strong discourse has proved effective in the promotion and sustenance of stereotypical ideas about gender. The sustenance of stereotypical ideas about gender has added to the maintenance of the status quo. The maintenance of the status quo has promoted injustice, discrimination and inequality of gender which has affected the various aspects of woman’s life, including the psychological one. Linguistic sexism has been a tool which has been utilized in the proverbs of Pashto about woman and through denigration and belittlement, a sense of inferiority has been developed in her about her own worth, intelligence, potentials and capabilities. It would not be wrong to say that Pashto proverbs, which portray woman negatively have impacted her psyche about her negative self-image, which she has further transmitted to the women of coming generations. A mother will cultivate the same inferiority in her daughter and other younger which is a part of her training through the negative discourses. The current study is an effort in this regard. It will critically analyze the impact which gender biased proverbs have left on the psyche of woman and has added to the continuation of gendered culture and a social order based on imbalance. The critical analysis of proverbs about gender will be made in the light of Foucault’s concept of Power and Knowledge. The study is interpretive qualitative research, so, the tool of thematic analysis has been applied to it.

Key Words: Gender, Pashto proverbs, Pashto literature, Pashtun woman, Foucault,

INTRODUCTION

Proverbs are a treasure which are expressive of the cultural, social and traditional wisdom of a people. The basic themes and ideas of proverbs have been extracted from the basic human experiences, observations and activities (Schipper, 2010) and human nature and the ideas and themes, which evolve from it have a tremendous similarity across cultures. According to Schipper (2010) and as has further been cited by Gebeyehu (2019, 479), whenever there is a matter of gender identity, it is

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Patriarchy that comes in the way and discards that idea about gender equality and her distinct individual status, which is evident in a Dutch proverb: “A good woman goes without head.” It has been mentioned that proverbs like all other genres of the folklore evolve from human nature and human nature is the same everywhere. There are a large number of proverbs in Pashto language which shed light on the different aspects of the Pashtun social life (Maghmoom, 2014: 4). Proverbs in the Pashtun culture have evolved throughout their social history and are one of the most frequently genres of the folklore, which are referred to as sayings of the wise **د کاني کرښي**. A keen insight into the Pashto gender related proverbs reveal the fact that they have played a significant role in the perpetuation and reinforcement of inequality and injustice towards woman. These proverbs have defined, described and strengthened gender roles (Khan et al, 2015). Pashtun society accepts and recognizes the role of woman in the different relationships of mother, sister, daughter and wife. Pashto proverbs as a discourse exclude woman from the public sphere and restrict her role to the domestic sphere. A woman who performs well in the household is appreciated. This state of affairs, which has continued throughout the social history of Pashtuns, has framed the psyche of woman to be fit for the domestic world and that the public and social world does not belong to her. In short, the gender related proverbs of Pashto like “Woman is foot wear, if you do not like it, change it” **بنځه څپلی ده چې دي خوبنه نه وي بدله يي** “It is better to give birth to daughter than to sit idle” **د هسي ناستي نه بڼه ده چې** **لور وزیږیږي**, “It is better for a woman that her head be shaved off than to be thrown out of home” **سر څرنیلي بڼه ده میره شړلی نه ده بڼه** (Tair & Edwards, 2006: 293) and that “Men are wearing white turbans as these are given to them by women” **سروته دا** **سپین پټکي بنځو په سر کړي دي** (Lashkari, 2005: p.65; Tair & Edwards, 2006: p. 291, Farid et al, 2023c). The linguistic sexism in the discourse of proverbs have shaped and molded the psyche of woman in different ways. In some proverbs she has been treated with denigration by treating her very existence shameful for the family and society, in others she has been advised to suffer humiliation at the hands of man as he is her sole protector and supporter. In so many proverbs about her she has been declared as the protector of man’s honor (Sanauddin, 2015). The shackles of culture, traditions and customs of society have bound woman psychologically through patriarchal strategy to an extent that she has considered herself as worthless object suitable for the household affairs (Farid, 2023d). According to Kerschen (1998, 124), gender stereotypes and proverbs are now considered as harmful to the cause of national progress and the development of woman. Moreover, the modern approaches in the social sciences and theories of 20th century have also adopted a critical and practical perspective towards so many social issues, including that of gender.

Pashto proverbs, as strong social discourse, but due to the derogatory and disparaging image of woman which it has portrayed, has affected the psychological aspect of her life besides other aspects (Farid et al 2023a, Farid et al 2023b). The negative portrayal and the negative image of woman about herself, needs to be thoroughly investigated,

as it has proved a hurdle in the way of social development. The gender problem is a source of many challenges, especially in the modern times, such as convincing a large section of population psychologically that they are capable for the performance of so many tasks and that their participation and contribution will leaves an impact on the overall progress and development of Pashtun society. More than that Pashtun men also need to change their conventional thinking that woman is only made for home and that domestic world is her only domain. Taken in this, perspective the psychological impact on the life of woman due to the issue of gender in the Pashtun society needs a deeper analysis.

ANALYSIS OF THE PROVERBS

Social discourses do impact the lives and more than that the psyche of the oppressed groups. Pashto proverbs have also impacted the psychological aspect of woman's life. According to the Standpoint Theory, gender differences cannot be attributed to biology, maternal instinct or women's intuition. The differences on the basis of gender are the result of different expectations from men and women. As a result of these different expectations from different genders, they also receive different treatment from one another (Wood, 450). Women's psyche is also shaped by cultures, by psychologically preparing her for the social roles and to add more to it the right and wrong for her according to the social expectations from her in accordance with the roles. The discourse of proverbs portrays her to be weaker physically and mentally and so not capable for many tasks, which is cultural construct, on the one hand, but which psychologically, she has also accepted as her own incapability and weakness. A woman, who since childhood hears proverbs like "The best of woman cannot replace a man," *بنځه که ډېره هم بڼه شي خو د سړي خانے نه شي نیولے* "Decision making is a masculine trait, while procrastination is feminine" *توکل نر اندېښنه بنځه* or "A woman's work is never properly done" *د بنځو کار همپشه خراب وي* and that "Instead of telling secret to woman tell it to a drummer," *چی بنځي ته حال وائي نو ډم ته يې ولي نه وائي*," will definitely be psychologically affected by the ideas transmitted by the social discourses, specifically proverbs, which are considered as sacred sayings and which, moreover, also enjoy an authenticity of the collective wisdom, experiences and observations of the older generations. The deeply rooted ideas carried by social discourses are transmitted by older women to their daughters and other younger women, thus the transmission occurs from generation to generation, thus becoming part and parcel of their mental and psychological make-up and developing in them inferiority about their own potentials. This lower image of self and inferiority about oneself and one's distinct identity is transferred from women of the older generations to those of the younger generations, thus consciously and unconsciously becoming the transmitters of negative ideologies about themselves and the process has continued for centuries. The psychological impact of the whole process is evident in women's fear of doing something challenging and those tasks or jobs which are socially considered as man's domain or his sphere of influence. Women, through the influence of negative

discourses about themselves have been restricted by the traditional views to subsidiary level and that too by strategically gaining their compliance. Through their own compliance they have become the victims of negative discourses about themselves, which they have psychologically accepted. If they have ever tried to go against the social impositions on them, they have been silenced on one pretext or another. They are specifically silenced on the pretext of going against the norms and the traditionally set behavior, which cultures require of them. According to Davies (1986, 8), and as has been cited by Hussein (2009, 99) "The centuries of inferiority and servility in the patriarchal systems, hierarchies of gender have chained woman in the negative image about herself. Throughout the historical period she has developed a self-defeating image of her own self." In short, cultural constructs of femininity and masculinity enter every nook and corner of the social system and shape the thinking and psyche of different groups. Besides shaping the thinking, the view of masculinity and femininity also shapes the psyche of the groups. According to Fairclough and Wodak, as has been cited by Hussein (2009, 99), "in a social structure which is not based on harmony and co-ordination, discourses serve to perpetuate and strengthen the imbalance in relationships and to convince the subjugated groups to accept its subjugation as discourse is socially constructed. Through the traditionally set discourses women are convinced of what is her job and what is man's job and they do not think of questioning or challenging it. The statement, which is about the persuasion of the subjugated group about their own subjugation through discourse, naturally leaves an impact on the psyche of the subjugated group. Abdullah (2016, 458) in her study "Gender Bias in Malay Language," through different instances reaches the conclusion that the linguistically subjugated status of woman is ascertained by the independent status of man. Women are brought down to the level of subordination and dependence and for that purpose sexist language is brought into use. Sexist language does not allow women to enjoy the status of equality. Sexist language also plays an effective role in shaping the psyche of woman about her inferiority and she acts accordingly. There is a Pashto proverb which portrays the earning of woman in sexist language. It says that "What is the significance of the burden carried by a mule the earning of woman?" د خري كته به څه وي او د بنځي گټه به څه وي. The sexist language about woman through repetition shapes woman's view about the worthlessness of her earning and she gives up the idea about hard work for her own earning as discourses leave an on the minds of both groups. The psychological impact of discourses is on both groups, the oppressed and the oppressor, as both the groups learn them through repetition, and are influenced from them in the similar way, the oppressed about their worthlessness and inferiority and the dominant group about their superiority and upper hand over the oppressed group and to comply with their subservience due to their own incapacity.

According to a study which has been conducted by Lema (2021, 20), which is about "Sexism and misogyny in selected proverbs of the Chaga of Machame," argues that

girls, and then other proverbs which discourage and depreciate the birth of a baby girl, so, when girls since infancy and childhood hear such discourses about themselves, they will certainly be negatively affected by them, an idea of her worthlessness will be developed in a female child. Furthermore, discourses through repetitions inculcate such ideas in the form of social norms in the minds of the oppressed groups since infancy, which leave negative imprint on their psyche in the time to come. A girl who will see her mother wishing for a son to be born to her and valuing son more than a daughter, will herself aspire to have a son as a grown up woman. Foucault is of the view that power in cultures and social structures is not through conscious suppression or blatant violation. He argues in the *History of Sexuality, Volume One*, that “if power was never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but say no, do you really believe that we should manage to obey it?” (1978, 36). So, power, according to Foucault, produces a particular type of knowledge, which goes in harmony with the requirement of cultural order. In that way, power shapes norms and different forms of behavior, which goes in harmony with the requirements of a cultural order and creates “Regimes of Truth” (1980, 131). If viewed in the Foucauldian context, power produces knowledge in the form of discourse, which is the societal truth, which in turn sets norms of behavior, playing a role in shaping the psyche of the different social groups for compliance with the discourses. This is how different groups in the social structure are assigned different roles and to which they show subservience without questioning or challenging. According to Kerschen (1998, 2), researches on folklore which cover the gender issue or the folklore composition about women have remained minimum and most of the folklore scholarship has remained in the hands of man. The researches on the folklore have been conducted by men and women, for centuries had no say even in their own affairs and for that matter, they have remained at the mercy of man, who has presented their negative and distorted image to the world in discourses. This condition has contributed to the status quo about woman and the prevailing negative social picture about her (Kochman-Hatadyj & Kleparski, 2011). In the social setup individuals and groups cannot escape the psychological impact of discourses as it is through discourses that their views, opinions and psyche is shaped. According to Lema (2021), proverbs among Chaga of Machame, have been studied with scholarly purpose, which have yielded convincing results. For example, proverbs have been embodied with authenticity and truth, which has an objective behind them. Women have been psychologically convinced that anything which is true and which is based on the wisdom and experiences of the past generations cannot be challenged. If women cannot challenge the truth of proverbs as a discourse, they will not even think of challenging their own subordination and servility as they are convinced that its truth is neither changeable nor challengeable (Kweka, 2006). Besides being the symbol of traditional truth and wisdom, the gender biased proverbs strategically and psychologically persuade woman that going against this truth and wisdom is like shaking the foundation of the whole patriarchal structure, as through this psychological manipulation, cultures cling on to the injustice and inequity, which they

do to women. Many negative traits have been associated with woman in the Pashto sexist proverbs, which can be possessed by men as well; indecisiveness, unfaithfulness, unsteadiness, incapability, lack of wisdom and confidence, incapacity for taking any task to accomplishment, and so on. The established discourses have associated such type of traits with women and these are accepted as feminine traits. According to Foucault, most of the knowledge is produced by excluding the other. Thus, there is to be suspicion about such information and knowledge, which even if adds to the sum of human knowledge, it may at the same time have a role in the maintenance of the status quo and the existing power relations (Mills, 2005; 72). If women hear proverbs like “the useless women sit and give birth to daughters” **بېکاري کښيني او خواري زيگوي** or “better to give birth to a daughter than to sit idle” **د هسي ناستي نه بڼه ده چې لور وزيگوي**. Such type of discourses psychologically impact the weaker groups in a negative way and women as a weaker group in this instance, instead of aspiring to have daughters, will aspire to have sons, as they fear social condemnation if it is the otherwise. This is how the psyche of the weaker and oppressed groups is shaped that they develop a dislike for their own gender. This dislike for one’s own gender is an inferiority about one’s own self which is also the psychological impact of gender biased discourses. It is due to the psychological impact of discourses that mothers treat sons as superior compared to daughters.

The gender biased discourses give an impression of superiority to the dominant group and inferiority to the dominated about themselves. According to Lazar (2008, 92), and as has been cited by Lomotey and Chachu (2020, 73), the gender biased proverbs unravel the fact that the construction of gender through discourse and then further its reinforcement is the strategy of the ideological structures to maintain the status quo. Thus the role of man and woman is created socially where woman is at loss while man gets the privileged position, where the psyche of woman is impacted more as she lives under the image of her weakness in so many faculties. Societies and cultures get benefit of woman’s image of inferiority about herself, and according to Lazar, gender discrimination is perpetuated through the construction of linguistic expressions. According to Harding et al (451), the standpoint theorists lay stress on the social location of people from where they speak as at the top of the societal hierarchy, those privileged ones who have the right to define what it means to be female, male or anything else in a given culture, and moreover, that definitions come from the ones with the right to define and not the defined ones. The social groups that have the privilege to define the important aspects of a given culture in the form of concepts, assumptions and also hypotheses which leave an imprint on the picture of that culture. There are proverbs in Pashto which is the voice of the dominant groups about the dominated like “The earth and the Pashtun woman remains silent” **د زمکي او د پښتنې** **د زمکي او د پښتنې** and “The water mill is known for its noise and woman is known for staying at home” **ژړنده په شور بڼه بڼکاري او بڼخه په کور**. Now these definitions and established views about gender in the form of social discourses come from the

ones, who have the right to define, and not the defined ones. These discourses impact the psyche of the defined groups as if they try to go against them, they are silenced on the pretext of going against the norms. Besides the fear of social exclusion, boycott and isolation which woman faces if she goes against the norms which have been set for her, she is rewarded in the form of good names and titles of a good woman and an ideal woman. According to Gyekye (1996), and cited by Gyan et al (2020,3), “discourses have a sway over how we interpret our everyday existence both consciously and unconsciously. Furthermore, the same discourses influence our way of thinking in the social setup and our relationships.” Now Gyekye’s view about discourse and its impact on individuals’ ways of thinking in the social world and also their relationships holds enormous significance as it also includes their psyche. So, it can be said that Pashto proverbs as a social discourse and its emphasis on the silence and subservience of woman does affect her psychologically. The psychological impact of discourses is deeper than the social and economic impact of discourses on human life.

Discourses control and shape the behaviors of individuals in societies not through coercion and not by commanding them to behave in this or that specific way, but by shaping their views psychologically, to act and behave in those ways which are required of them. The two proverbs which are about woman’s silence and about her social restriction have certainly an effect on her psyche through compliance with the norms and her social treatment in the form of social isolation in case she violates them. She fears that in case of going against the code, which has been set for her in the form of these social norms, she will face opposition and resistance, that is why the weaker groups in most of the cases know the intentional injustice and discrimination being done to them, do not even think of rising against it out of the fear of social isolation and seclusion. Whenever or wherever, woman has tried to raise her head about the injustice or inequality, she has been silenced on the pretext of going against the norms and a rebel. According to Foucault, and as has been cited by Hewett (2014, 22), says that “truth needs to be investigated by us and the aspect of it as an effect and not something as of universal nature. The aspect of truth, which needs to be investigated is that it is something, which has developed as well as changed in history.” According to Addo-Fening (2001), cited by Gyan et al (2020,2), African oral traditions and proverbs are considered as sacred truth, and to these linguistic resources the traditional Ghanaian communities show complete conformity, without even thinking of questioning them. Addo-Fening’s views can be appropriately applied to the Pashto sexist proverbs. Pashto proverbs are also considered as divine truth, and the views transmitted by the gender biased proverbs are also considered as unquestionable and unchallengeable truth, followed by Pashtuns without interrogation, and the negative views expressed by them about woman have taken roots in the psyche of all classes and they look at them from that same psychological perspective, as it true that people living in a culture cannot escape from its deep-rooted discourses psychologically.

According to Hussein (2009, 102), and as has been cited by Saidi (2010,180), there are proverbs which bring women's faculties and potentials down to the lowest level by putting an emphasis on their inferiority to men. Hussein has cited an Ethiopian proverb which says that "Women are big but not great" and a Kenyan proverb which says that "Women and an invalid man are the same." The Kenyan proverb belittles a man who fails to keep up to the norms of masculinity, so, is equivalent to women, by which is meant as useless and worthless as women. It is culture which draws the psychological distinction between a man and woman, and specifically, if a man violates the line on the basis of which his masculinity is evaluated, he comes down to the level of women. There is a similarity of ideas which exist across cultures in discourses about this subject. There are Pashto proverbs which have unanimity with the above mentioned African proverbs: "Even the best amongst women cannot equal men" and that "Amongst many women an invalid is considered the real man." The similarity of idea in the proverbs of the languages signify the fact that human psyche is also the same across cultures, and it is on the basis of this similarity that such universal ideas take birth and are watered by the biased minds. According to Jackson (1993), and as has been cited by Ghilzai et al (2020,2), women and men are socially constructed, and then relationally and culturally assigned roles and positions. The statement by Jackson (1993) provides a proof that masculine and feminine psyche is socially and culturally shaped in Patriarchal structures to create the idea of man's superiority and woman's inferiority. Societies and cultures have remained successful in strategically shaping the roles of men and women through discourses. Girls and boys since the beginning are trained to behave in different ways. Boys are told that if they play with girls, they will lose their masculine traits. There is a common Pashto saying which has adopted proverbial form and which says to the boys that "Playing with girls will grow you tails" **چې جینکو سره لوبی کوي نو لکی یې وشي**. This proverb has an impact on shaping the psyche of both genders since the beginning. It can be said that cultures determine and specify the roles of genders and draw a strict demarcation for both. Kiyimba (2001) argues that that oral literature is extremely useful as a medium of entertainment and social education. He puts forward suggestions that the issue of gender stereotyping can be delivered through both formal and informal training and education to undermine the strict division. As despite so much progress and modernization, the issue of gender still persists. Gender ideology has deeply rooted support from so many social circles. The social support for this issue which exists at so many levels also include proverbial language (Hussein, 2004). According to Ghilzai et al (2020, 5), in a study on the gender related proverbs of Pashto, while citing a Pashto gender biased proverb say that "When it is time to milk the cow, the disorganized woman will go to grind the grains" **چې غوا غوږلي له ځي نو خدری مېچني له ځي**, highlighting women as disorganized, unwise and acting in a rash way, without thinking of the consequences. These type of discourses have a negative impact on women by shaping their psyche about themselves of their own worthlessness. Even women become sharers in

spreading negative discourses against women. When I was small I would often hear my mother citing the proverb about women which says that “If women were without nose, they would have fed on filth” **که چري د بنځو پوزي نه وي نو غول به يي خورل**. According to Hussein (2009) that some proverbs do not portray women in a negative manner explicitly but implicitly through the use of metaphors, similes and imageries which connote women negatively. The implicit negative association of inferiority and negativity with women take root in the whole psyche of cultures and societies (Hussein, 2005; 61). According to Lema (2021), an essential role is played by proverbs in the social and psychological construction of masculinity and femininity in communities. According to Mbiti (1998) and as has been cited by Lema (2021), marriage among the Chaga of Machame is a decisive communal event. Nothing is said about this ceremony’s association with one’s personal liking or experience in the discourse of proverbs. Proverbs describe it for woman as a source of status and identity. A proverb of the Chaga community says that an “Unmarried woman dies wandering.” The proverbs delimit woman’s sphere in this relationship by focusing on man’s independence and that she has no identity without man. These discourses are cultural tools which play upon the psyche of woman and develop a sense of weakness in her about herself. Discourses across cultures have a prominent likeness about ideas which relate to gender. A Pashto proverb says that “Woman without husband is like a garden without fence” **بي خاونده بنځه بي انگنه باغ دے**. This proverb enforces woman’s weakness without the companionship and support of man. There are proverbs with similar themes in other cultures which speak of the similarity found in the portrayal and treatment of gender across cultures.

CONCLUSION

Pashto proverbs as one of the most popular and most quoted genre of folk literature and as a social discourse portray women in a negative way with derogation, belittlement and disparagement. Proverbs declare public sphere as non-existent for woman and even about the household activities and the management of domestic affairs, she is mostly depicted in a mocking and contemptuous manner in order to highlight her as not equal to the responsibilities assigned to her at a smaller level. Compared to her, Pashto proverbs magnify and glorify man’s capabilities, to emphasize that they are capable of holding power and authority. Woman also through linguistic sexism in the discourse has complied herself with the denigration and inferiority as her fate psychologically. She has been shattered by the negative image of herself, and moreover, has become the promoter of negativity about herself through the discourses. The views inculcated in her psyche through the discourse have been that if she properly fulfills the role required of her according to the Pashtun code, she will be considered as an ideal woman. Pashtun woman has psychologically aspired to fulfill the social demand from her. Through the ideals of masculinity and femininity in the patriarchal structures woman has been kept at the losing end by idealizing her

servility, obedience and compromises and psychologically bringing her to agreement with the assigned inferior role and status.

In today's world of the 21st century societies cannot move ahead in the race of progress and development by restricting half their population in the four walls of home and excluding them from the social arena. Half population should not be left at the mercy of negative discourses in order to fulfill man's desire for superiority as it is man who is psychologically scared of an aware and independent woman. The patriarchal structures have strategically kept woman inferior through discourses and unluckily, woman has psychologically accepted that inferiority as her fate. Educated women can also play a part in creating awareness amongst women who are not the privileged ones. Women should no more allow themselves and other women to remain the victims of negative discourses. Women scholars should come forward to conduct researches on gender biased proverbs and other genres of the folklore where gender bias is found. Children at home and at educational institutions should be taught respect for gender and negative discourses about the same subject are to be substituted by positive ones. As the negative discourses have a psychological effect on women specifically, researches on negative impact of discourses should be conducted to bring awareness in women specifically, and in the masses in general. There is also a strong need to highlight the positive discourses along with the positive proverbs compared to the negative ones. Positive change in the Pashtun society can come only if woman comes out of the centuries old negative image about herself as it is her cause and the initiative for its correction should come from her side. She would have to adopt a pragmatic and practical approach instead of living in the Utopian world of idealism, which is about her exploitation.

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