

Women in Proverbs of Malayalam language

Dr.Aji K.S, Department of Linguistics, University of Mysore

Abstract:

Language is the reflection of society. The values and vision of a society is especially seen in the proverbs of the language it uses. Often proverbs reflect wisdom, truth, moral, and tradition that belong to the society. The present paper discusses the status of women in proverbial expressions of Malayalam language. It also discusses the degree of sexism in the proverbs as a reflection of society. When we talk about sexism in proverbial expression, it is nothing but discrimination to one sex against favoritism to other sex. Generally the bias is in favor of male gender. In this paper I am trying to analyze the reason and different aspects of this discrimination and its implication in Malayalam language.

Introduction:

Defining proverb is a complex task. Proverbs are beyond the boundary of definition. Usually proverbs not only depict social reality but also advise its listeners how to live in that real society. By nature these proverbs are small, they never try to give any suggestions, solve the problem or suggest any revolutionary alternatives to reigning customs; rather, they provide insights into how to live in a social order and also supply insights into God's moral ideals. Lord John Russell says "A proverb is the wit of one and the wisdom of many". More constructively, Mieder has proposed the following definition, "A Proverb is a short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed, and memorisable form and which is handed down from generation to generation". So in any

proverbs we can see the element of truth, vision, values, belief in which they belonged to etc.,

Sexism in language has long been a favorite topic in sociolinguistics. Language plays an important role in society. As a phenomenon of society, language reflects all the aspects of human society. Existence and development of a language is closely linked with the social attitudes of human beings and to a great extent are affected by their social views and values. The relevance of Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is admired in this context. Socio-cultural behaviors and attitudes as well as thoughts of human being are reflected in their use of the language. A Proverb has many things to reveal, the attitude of the society, thought of the people, and their way of life. Some time they appeared as just rhyming words. Proverbs are really the wealth and beauty of language, which discloses development and existence of a culture. There are two categories of proverbs, the one with moral teaching and the other with cynical representation.

The immortality of Proverbs is always under scrutiny. The proverbs with moral teachings are mortal. The validity of the some Proverbs has direct relation with time and space. At the same time there are Proverbs which succeeded time and space. So analyzing the proverb with the change of time and space is an inevitable task, it is rather an investigation of cultural values of the time in which it is originated.

This paper emphatically analyzes the specific phenomena of sexism in Malayalam language, especially in the Proverbs. Like any other language in Malayalam too Proverbs denote women as a symbol of beauty,

tenderness, weakness, low status metaphorically. Though metaphor is one of the characteristic of Proverbs, sarcasm is the underlying feature, when it represents women. It is the reflection of social attitudes. The status of woman has changed according to the change in the scenario of society. They are seen in all walks of life. The role of women in nuclear families has also changed. In the past, women were supposed to stay at home, remaining economically dependent and generally subordinate to man, whereas men are considered as the center both in the family and society. Women were treated as “the weaker sex” in society. Prior to analyzing the status of women in proverbs, I would like to go through the status enjoyed by women in ancient India.

Status of Ancient Women in India:

The condition of women in Rig Vedic period was good. They enjoyed high status in society. They had high opportunities in intellectual and spiritual field. There was no Sati system or early marriage. Since the Later-Vedic period women started being discriminated against in education and other rights and facilities. Child marriage, Sathi, the Purdah and polygamy further worsened the status of women. The Epics and Puranas equated women with property. Even Buddhism did little for women. There were female bodyguards, spies and ‘Stri-adhyaksha mahamatras In Maurya kingdom. Upper caste ladies had to accept the Purdah. During this period men were polygamous and widow burning was an accepted norm. Arthashastra imposed more stigmas on women as Kautilya dismissed women’s liberation and they were not free even to go elsewhere without husband’s permission. In the reign of Gupta the situation became worse. The Smritishastras abused them; Manu dictated that a woman would be dependent on her father in childhood, on her husband in youth and on her son in old age. Apart from child marriage and sati, prostitution and Devadasi system became widespread.

At the same time there are some exceptions in this dismal picture in later vedic period. The role of women in Ancient Indian Literature is immense. Ancient India had many educated

women. There were two types of scholarly women — the Brahnavadinis, or the women who never married and cultured the Vedas throughout their lives; and the Sadyodvahas who studied the Vedas till they married. Panini mentioned female students’ studying Vedas. Katyana called female teachers Upadhyaya or Upadhyayi. Ashoka got his daughter, Sanghamitra, inducted into preaching Buddhism. From the Jain texts, we learn about the Kousambi princess, Jayanti, who remained a spinster to study religion and philosophy. Often, Buddhist nuns composed hymns. Women did write Sanskrit plays and verses, excelled in music, painting and other fine arts.

Women often enjoyed prominent roles in politics. Pandya women running the administration is mentioned by Megasthenes. The Satavahana queen, “Nayanika and Pravabati, daughter of Chandragupta II ruled the kingdom on behalf of their minor son. A little after the Gupta period, queens used to rule in Kashmir, Orissa and Andhra. Princess Vijaybhattarika acted as the provincial ruler under the Chalukya King; Vikramaditya I. Women were provincial and village administrators in the Kannada region.

Status of common women folk.

In India we have Goddess Durga as the symbol of strength, Goddess Saraswathi as the symbol of education and Goddess Lakshmi as the symbol of wealth. Also, India is depicted as our motherland. But on the flip side the common woman, the majority behind the scene, have been suffering ignominy, deprivation and hurdles. With the embracement of patriarchal society, men took advantage of their physical strength and took the upper hand in social economy thus enjoying a higher social status along with it. Women were restrained as they had to be dependent on men. They lost their social, economic and family status, and thereby leading to a long-stereotyped notion that women are responsible for domestic trifles, but men are working outside as breadwinners. The structure of the patriarchal society inevitably lead to changes in Language that indicated the superior status and central role of men while demeaning the passive role of women. Hence,

language is marked with discrimination towards women and sexism in language came forth. This reflection of the social attitude is seen in the proverbs. How the women are treated in the proverbs is an enquiry towards the status of women in the society. This paper is a reflection of the aforesaid attitude of Kerala society. Here are a few examples classified according to their implied meaning.

Courage of women in metaphorical way.

1. Aninum Thuuninum Atangathaval. (A lady who never bends to the will of a man and the strength of a pillar); a headstrong woman

2. Oru veettil rantu pennu oru kuutil rantu nariyum oru pole. (Two women in a house is like two foxes in a cage); Crooked and Quarrelling women

3. Pidakozi kuukunna kalam.(The times when the hen crows); Sarcastically implying a woman who voices her opinion.

4. Pidakkozi kuukiyal neram velukkumo. (If the hen crows, will the sun rise): Implying the unimportance of a woman's opinion.

5. Pennorumbettal bhrahmenum thadukkillla.(Once a woman takes a decision even Lord Brahma cannot get in her way): a stubborn woman

6. Nari bharichidam, narakam nattidam nadinum veedinum nannalla.(The place which is ruled by women and the land where the lemon tree is planted are not good to live); implying the incapability of a woman to rule

In these examples courage of the women and strength that she shows is treated in a metaphorical way as in example five; if a woman is focused nobody can deter her. Most of the time women with courage are treated sarcastically like in the example six which says that the place where a woman rules is not a proper place to live .This examples shows the attitude of the society towards women.

Dependency of women:

1. Aale nokki pennum ,maram nokki kodiyaum.(women is always after a man like a climber is after a tree); implying the dependency of women.

2. Amgushamillatha chapalyame angana yennu vilikkunnu ninne njan(Frailty: thy name is women): implying the weakness of women

3. Ela chennu mullil veenalum, mullu chennu elayil veenalum, keedu elakku thanne. (when a leaf falls on a thorn, or a thorn falls on a leaf the damage is beared only by the leaf); implying women as the sufferer even when it is not her fault

4. Pen pada padayalla, man chira chirayalla (An army of women does not deserve to be called an army just as a bund made out of mud is not a bund.); again targeting the weakness of women

5. Thankam mangaye mayakkum.(The women always swoons to gold.)

Here, all these examples depict women as weak and dependent. Women are so weak that she cannot live without man. There is also an underlying warning in these examples as to the safety of women. Also, it can be noted that in the third example frailty and woman are equated.

Demearing:

1. Pen Bhudhi Pin buddhi.(a woman's wit always comes late); implying that women are not as witty or intelligent as men

2. Pen vakku kettavan peruvazhiyil.(Those who listen to women, will always end up in the streets); implying that a woman can only give bad advice.

3. Puthanacchi purapuram adikkum. (Bride will clean even the roof in the beginning, later you will see her true face)

Since ages a woman's intelligence has been looked down upon by the society as is evident in the above proverbs. This might have been so because a woman was never given a platform to display her intelligence or wit as a common woman was always subdued and socially restrained.

Property:

1. Pennum, mannum nannakkiyal nannavum.(woman and soil can be nurtured); Equating woman to property.

2. Thuunum charinnavan pennum kontu poyi. (The one who leaned on the pillar left with the woman); Implying how easy it is to possess a woman.

3. Pennayi pirakkana neeram mannayi pirakkanam.(when you are born as a woman, you are born as soil): it could imply the nurturing capacity of a woman but also depicts women just as a means of procreation.

4. Kanakam muulam kamini moolam kalaham palavidham ulakil sulabham (The world is filled with war and quarrel because of woman and gold); implying that women are objects, like gold, are fought over for possession)

Women in these proverbs have only been considered as properties like land and gold that are meant to be possessed and passed on or as a means for the continuity of human kind while ignoring her other qualities.

Causative:

1. Talle nokki pille vanganam.(before you buy a calf you have to see the mother thoroughly); implying that women are the primary caregivers.

2. Thalla thadi vazhiyenkil pilla elachil vazhi.(If the mother goes through the stem , the child will go through the leaf). Like mother like child.

3. Amma velichadiyal molu mathilu chadum.(if a mother jumped the fence, the daughter will surely jump the wall) Implying that a daughter will always learn from her mother and could overdo her too.

4. Thalla vazhi pilla , Thana vazhi vellam.(A child goes after his/her mother just as the water flows down the slope): again implying the crucial role of a mother in a child's growth

5. Eshtamillathachhi, thottathellam kuttam.(The deeds of a disliked women are always criticized); Implying how a woman is always under scrutiny and is always targeted.

These Proverbs clearly upholds the status of a woman as a mother depicting her as the primary caregiver and also the sole nurturer in a child's growth. In every culture a mother has always been given the highest appreciation as

recognition for her responsibilities. These are evident in these Malayalam proverbs too. But she is also under scrutiny incase her child goes wayward and the entire blame is put on her.

Fidelity:

1. Pennu chathichalum mannu chathikilla.(Woman may cheat , but your land will not): implying a woman's infidel nature.

2. Madodiya thodiyum, nadodiya pennum samam. (The field where the cow rambled is same as a woman who roamed around); Implying that a woman's place is at home.

This clearly implies the intolerance of the society to a woman's infidelity.

Neutral:

1. Thalla kozi chavittiyal kinjikozi chakilla.(if the mother hen steps on her chicks, they will not die): implying the motherly care.

2. Kudiyarinje pennayakkavu.(you have to make sure about the in laws home before you marry her off.); implying the parent's concern over a daughter.

3. Pathamma chamanjalum pettamm-ayakuula. (ten women who act like mothers cannot replace one's own mother); The irreplaceable status of a mother.

4. Akathoru pennuntenkil akathoru thiiyuntu. (If there is a woman in the house, there will be fire in that house); this could depict a woman as a vital part of the house or a reason for concern.

5. Gothra marinju pennum, pathramarinju bhikshayum.(Before you marry off a girl you should know about the family the same way you should know about the person before you give something to him.); Again depicting a parent's concern for their daughter.

The role of woman as a mother and a home maker is appreciated in the society. Parents' concern about the safety of girl children of those days and the concept of morality are depicted here.

There are no hard and fast principles to classify Proverbs. From these examples we can

find that the Proverbs depict reality of the times it existed in. It's primary concern being moral teaching. It is important to note that Proverbs undergo disuse atrophy as they lose their significance with changing social norms. Nevertheless, a retrospection helps in self evaluating the path we have traversed to achieve the monumental reforms of today. It is evident that Nature differentiated gender but man discriminated it. These proverbs are solid evidences of discrimination against feminine gender. This discrimination became part and parcel of socialization and eventually spread from home and workplace to be inculcated in mass media like television, radio and newspaper advertisements. At this juncture it is of utmost importance to recognize the effort of the education system to narrow down the gender biased gap in India by incorporating lessons against such discrimination thereby creating a much healthier society.

To sum up, gender discrimination in linguistics goes hand in hand with the gender discrimination in the society. Proverbs being an integral part of language and culture implicitly and explicitly showcase such social attitude. Such a scrutiny of proverbs in Malayalam language reveals the improvement in the status of women through the course of time which indicates the positive reform in the attitude of society which is obviously reflected in the language.

References:

1. Ronald Wardhaugh. (1986). *An Introduction to Sociolinguistic*. Basil Blackwell Inc.
2. Song, Hongbo. (2002). *Sexism in Language and Its Reform: A Comparative Study*. A Thesis for the M.A. Degree in English Language and Literature.
3. V.T.Sankunni Menon's (1939) *Pazhamchol Kathakal*, Calicut.
4. Pilo Paul,(1902),*Malayalam Proverbs*, Keralodayam.
5. Edited by Braj.B Kachru,Yamuna Kachru,S.N Sridhar,(2008)"*Languages in South India*."
6. Lado Robert(1961)., *Linguistics Across Culture*, An Arbor; University of Michigan Press,
7. Mahalingam T.V(1974), *Early South Indian Paliography*, University of Madras.
8. Chandra Shekhar A.C.,(1959)*The Malayalam Language*, T. L. C. D., Delhi,.