

Discourse Analysis on the Representation of Women in Western Gurage Proverbs

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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to assess the representation of females in Gurage proverbs. Its main objective was scrutinizing the contexts, in which proverbs represent women and their influences on Gurage women in the community. The proverbs were collected directly from the speakers of Gurage language, bulletins, magazines and books. The collected proverbs were thematically clustered and translated literally into English with a great attempt to keep its original meaning and beauty. Then, they were critically analyzed to observe how the community represents women. The finding showed that there are a large number of proverbs that represents women negatively. They are represented as physically weak, immature, feeble in teamwork, greedy, incapable in trading and in public works. But there are quite a few proverbs that portray the role of women positively such as motivator, supportive, committed and devoted as a mother and wife. Finally, the study recommended that the ways of representing women on the oral traditions in general and proverbs in particular need reconsiderations.

Keywords: proverbs, oral literature, discourse analysis, women, Gurage

INTRODUCTION

Oral literature is the verbal treasures of all human beings, and they are used to reflect the feelings and daily life of the people. It includes proverb, oral poetry, riddle, tale, legend, etc. This study mainly focuses on proverbs which are more dominantly used in the daily communication of every community. They act as a certain kind of information storage about people's lives, a certain mirror reflecting the life and the history of beliefs, customs, and ceremonies of the nation. They have been used in literate societies, but their function is more significant in non-literate societies, in which orally transmitting tradition dominates. Mieder (1993, p. 5) defines, "A proverb is a short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed and memorable form and which has been handed down from generation to generation."

Proverbs are short sayings which are used in the daily communication of the people reflect different aspects of the society. They are powerful and has great role in society. Corresponding to the importance of proverbs, Finnegan (1970, p. 396-397) states the role of proverbs as they are repositories of social and cultural wisdom and in many African cultures a feeling for language, imagery and for the expression of abstract ideas through condensed and indirect phraseology comes out particularly from proverbs.

Proverbs, as a sample of African oral traditions, constitute a literary resource and a literary potential that carry values, beliefs, customs; in a nutshell, the world-view of African cultures (Mieder, 2004, p. 89). Tchiboto (2015, p. 6) explains understanding of wisdom, sarcasm, pleasure, pedagogy, humor, tenderness, ethics,

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disappointment, praise, etiquette, friendship, enmity, religion, attitudes, perceptions, human ways of communication and war are- among others- matters which are conveyed through African proverbs using metaphorical expressions.

Proverbs are one means of reflecting the perception of one's society. In line with this, Buchanan (1965, p. 2) states that proverbs are used to show the identity of one society and equally reflect the strong and weak sides of any society. Standing from the above view, it is possible to say that proverbs are resources of one's society and the main means of expressing the image or understanding of the people.

Every society has its own ways of sayings and expression of a woman. The behaviors, activities and actions of a woman are expressed in controversial proverbs. Like other ethnic groups of Ethiopia, Gurage people have different traditions, values, socio-cultural realities, and these realities are described by the use of proverbs and other oral literature. Women in Gurage society have both positive and negative outlooks by the eyes of their counterparts and the society as a whole like other women in the world. Therefore, this paper mainly focuses on investigating and analyzing the images of women as reflected in Gurage proverbs since no one has conducted on this issue.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In Ethiopia, Gurage people have their own customs, traditions, history and language. They express common understanding and transmitted their beliefs and values from generation to generation through oral communication by Gurage language. Gurage language is envoy of cultures, traditions and customs of Gurage people since the beginning of the people at the area (Tiglu, 2016, p. 25). Thus, narratives of any speech are not told only for their own sake but also to impart some important aspect of social construction (Fekade, 2001, p. 45). The important aspect of verbal arts can be found when analyzed and interpreted according to the context and the purpose of the speaker.

Like other languages, Gurage people are rich in proverbs. These proverbs are the wealth of the people that passed from generation to generation through word of mouth representing the norms, attitudes, social status and culture of the people. Even though collecting and some proverbs have been begun by some individuals and zone culture and communication office, they have not been organized, analyzed and interpreted the representation of women. So, the focus of this study was on collecting, interpreting and analyzing proverbs which portray women. At the end, this study is intended to answer the following questions.

1. How women are represented in most Gurage proverbs?
2. How the patriarchal discourses are influencing women's life in the community?
3. In what way females contributions are appraised in Gurage proverbs?

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The main objective of the study is to collect, interpret and analyze the images of women as reflected in Western Gurage proverbs. To this end the study attempt:

- To identify the representation of women in Western Gurage proverbs
- To analyze the influence of patriarchal discourses in Gurage proverbs on the life of women in the community
- To appraise the contribution of Gurage proverbs in valuing women's role.

METHODOLOGY

Research Setting and Data Collection Procedures

The study was conducted in Gurage zone. This study is a kind of qualitative study, and it aims to investigating and analyzing the representation of women in Western Gurage proverbs. The subjects of this study were elders (both sexes) of the Cheha, Gumer, Inor and Ezha Woredas. The first action in collecting proverbs was finding recognized elders of Gurage. The elders were chosen as the main participants of the study because they are more frequent in using oral literature especially proverbs in their day to day conversations. They were found through the help of Gurage zone administrative offices and district/ woreda

offices. To select sample elders from the selected Woredas, purposive sampling technique was employed. In addition to the data from elders, proverbs were collected from bulletins, magazines and books.

To gather genuine data, interview and document analysis were used. Interview was used to collect attitudinal information from informants. Documents that contain women related proverbs were used as data gathering tools.

Data Analysis Procedure

In this study, discourse analysis is used as a methodology. Discourse constructs the ways people think and respond to the realities and situations in that given period (Fairclough, 2013, p. 65). The interpretive model followed here falls under the critical discourse analysis (CDA) in which perceptions and underlying assumptions of the individuals and the society are considered in the representation of women in Western Gurage proverbs. Such perceptions of individuals and the society are influenced by social norms, status, gender, political and social powers and societal values (Weatherall, 2002, p. 76). Regarding this, Wodak and Chilton (2005, p. 150) summarize the main tenets of Critical Discourse Analysis /CDA/ as it addresses social problems. Thus, *such an interpretive* aspect of discourse is used as a methodology. In this study, the collected proverbs were grouped according to their theme. Then the proverbs were translated to English as carefully as possible to keep their original meanings and analyzed critically.

DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

In this part, proverbs which portray women were analyzed and interpreted based on their theme. They were classified into two broad categories namely: negative and positive images of the Gurage community towards women respectively. The two broad groups were also divided into subsections and presented as follows.

The Negative Representation of Women in Gurage Proverbs

In section the study presents proverbs which reflect the patriarchal views have been analyzed.

Proverbs which represents women as feeble in teamwork

1) እሸታ ቸነማም በማራ፣ውሳ አጩም ዩራ

Women sat together in row the Kocho/wusa was taken out raw.

2) ሴት በሽረማ ህዌት ያጠፈማ ቤት

When females become two, they destroy the house.

Proverb (1) reveals that when women sit in a group and start talking, they forget their responsibility to bake the food appropriately. In Gurage there are different cultural foods and Kocho is one of their staple foods. Preparation of Kocho Which is one of the duties of Gurage women needs a higher concentration. However, the expression shows that it is taken out in raw since a lot of women sat in the line. They offer a lot of attention for their chatting and forget to take out the food at the right time. This proverb deduces that women love talking very much when they get a chance to get together. Proverb (2) describes that when two women live in one house, they start competition and forget their main roles. According to Gurage people's perception, when female live together; they develop a feeling of jealousy towards each other. This leads them to conflict and not to do their house work cooperatively. Because of their antagonistic contestation, they destruct the peace of the family.

Generally, the above proverbs reflect that when women get together to do a certain task they never agree and forget what they were doing. Such patriarchal discourses are widely used in Gurage community and disregard women who are living together peacefully. They also discourage females to not to live cooperatively while Gurage culture strongly appreciate to share and grow together.

Proverbs which describe women as physically weak

3) ኧሚን ትኢም ቢውራ፡ የምሸትኛ ባረ

When he is asked "whom he wins," he said my wife.

4) ሁም እንቻ ቢስበሰብ አት ዋጥድ አይረሳ

A thousand women cannot set a pillar

The above proverbs indicate that women cannot be as strong as men because they are considered as physically weak and naturally cowardly. For instance, proverb (3) refers to a man who is known for his cowardice or physical weakness claims that he can win his wife. According to the Gurage people perception, every man is seen as powerful in the eyes of his family/ wife unless he will be insulted and degraded by the community. As a result based on the conception of the society, though the man is physically weak, he is able to win a female. Even though she is physically stronger than her husband, she has to be pretended as he is a winner. The fourth proverb also demonstrates that women are incapable to do heavy work. For example, in Gurage culture most of their houses are booty and they are constructed by men because planting the pillar is very difficult and done with in a group of men. However, the above proverb shows that women, whatever in number they are, cannot locate a pillar while it can be done by few men. This shows that according to Gurage community perception women are not expected to construct a house because they are seen as physically weak. Therefore, such kinds of proverbs men commonly use to announce women to know their inability to do the hard work.

All in all, the above patriarchal discourses reveal women inequality psychologically and physically. This influences women to accept the dominance of men and ignores strong women's role. In addition, these proverbs discourage them not to do what they can do as equal as men.

Proverbs which portray incapability of women in trading

5) አትኹርወ ብታቄጥ ትርፈታ ማቶት

If an unskilled women start trading, her profit will be becoming umbrage.

6) አትኹርወ ብታቄጥ አገገኛም የቤት

If an unskilled women start trading, her lasting will be soaking at home.

The above proverbs disregard the capability of women's to outbreak from failure. For instance, trade is the main source of income to Gurage people. Their life is totally linked with trade that is why almost all Ethiopians believe as Gurage people are born to be a merchant. Proverb (5) and (6) evoke that women are not strong and don't not have moral to revive from their failure if they failed once. Proverb (5) shows that once a women deficit in her trading, she does not want to assess why she failed and try to learn from it; rather she stop to talk about it and her umbrage come to the family. In doing so, such kind of person is called unskilled women. In addition to this Proverb (6) refers her final destination which is setting the whole day at home. In Gurage tradition, if someone get deficit in their work, they directly go to their village to prepare a ceremony. Then, they feed the villagers properly. The purpose of this ceremony is to get blessing from elders to be profitable in their work. However, based on the above proverbs when women failed, they do not perform such cultural activities rather they go home and become umbrage. As a result they lose their hope and become depressed.

All things considered, the above proverbs mistreat women who face some challenges on her private work while men are treated to start again by collecting money like 'Ekub' from relatives and workmates.

Proverbs that describe women as immature and foolish

7) ኦጥ በዘር ትጨን፤ ሁትም ዘንጋ ታቸን

Ignoramus women have birth in summer and make life miserable.

8) ንፍጭንኹ ቢውራያ፡ መጀ ሸመችም

She hides the grinding tool when she is asked to be helped.

9) የመስቀር ያገገያ ምሽራ እንምጊ መስቀር ቲመስርና ነገረችም

A girl who got married in "Maskel" always feel like Maskel.

10) በማርያሜ የዋረች ምሽት በዝቤት የጓደን ነረዌ ባረችም

A woman who spend in a ceremony asked whether there is a hungry person or not in the house.

11) የቅብ ቆርየሂታ ታታኻ ኣሳት ቸከረቸም

She cooked porridge without checking her butter pot.

12) ኣውኻ ጸበናቸሐማ ታይሂሪ በበናቸው ይሂሪ

Even though unskilled woman was not seen when she ate, one can observe in the materials that she used.

The above proverbs ignore women's natural proper thinking ability. In other words, the above proverbs reflect as women do not have a matured mind which thinks the cause and effect or the right and wrong. For example, proverb (7) depicts that though giving birth is a natural thing, women should have to analyze the season in which they give birth. It is her responsibility. Based on Gurage people life style, winter is the best season to give birth because it is a season in which everything is found in the house. Whereas summer is the season in which the stored crops for family are finished, new hopes are made, a lot of work is done. In short, it is marked as season of shortage. So, if she gives birth in summer, she is considered as immature person even if it is a natural thing because it brought many challenges: starvation, not to do summer works properly, led to knock the door of creditors and etc. Proverb (8) reflects the high level of women's immaturity. Gurage women prepare their food using traditional materials. For instance they grind crops using a handcraft traditional mill. To grind using this material, a woman should have to be strong enough. But most of the time they do it collaboratively. The proverb shows that when one asked a woman to support in grinding, she hides the grinding materials (masher). This shows how much they are foolish this is because when someone asked to be helped, hiding the instrument is not expected from a matured person. Here the woman rather than facilitating the situation the work has to be done, she become obstacle on her own business. Since everyone needs help to do such activities, one should have to accept and express gratitude to the support. Proverb (9) reflects that women are fools and do not think about what will happen tomorrow. Since we are living in 21c, it is difficult to get a person who considers all days are the same day. However the proverb (9) expresses that a woman who has got something better thinks every day is a holy day. Even though she knew her life as well as her husband capacity, she doesn't consider it. That is why the proverb "a girl who got married in "Maskel," she always feels like Maskel" is recited. Maskel is the festival of Holy Cross or the Finding of the True Cross; it is a big holiday to Gurage people. Unlike other Ethiopian ethnic groups, in this festival, Gurage people are known by slaughtering an ox in each household and eating too much meat and 'kitfo'. It is celebrated by all Christian Gurage people so that it became one of their popular cultural festivals. According to the proverb, a girl who got married in this big holiday which is celebrated once in a year feels that all coming days are holidays. This shows how much women are regarded as foolish and are supposed like thoughtless.

Similarly, proverb (10) witnesses as the community perceive women don't think wisely. It reflects that the girl talk or treat her family as they spend the day like how she spent while she knew that they didn't spend time with her. In other words, this proverb reveals that the woman is full and satisfied; she does not want to worry about others. She considers everything and every person in her situation or condition. If she is in good condition, she feels every person and every day is good.

Proverb (11 and 12) also strength the above discourses. In Gurage, porridge is one of their foods and it needs a lot of butter to be eaten. So, one should have to cook porridge if they only have adequate butter. However, proverb (11) reflects that a woman cooked porridge without knowing whether she has butter or not. This shows as women are unplanned. They do not consider what they have and what they are doing. In other words, this proverb is recited when a woman start doing something without giving priority to what she has. Likewise, proverb (12) evokes as women are not wise and do not have the ability to trick any person. They can be easily caught when they try to deceive. According to the response of the informants, the community uses these patriarchal proverbs to insult and show the silliness of women.

Generally, in the above patriarchal discourses, women are undermined as they are foolish and immature. They are seen as inferior and less intelligent.

Proverbs that represent women as greedy

13) ምሰና ተምሳህ ይርቅ ቁሳ ኣጅግ ኔምን

My husband is greater than yours so lend me cheese.

14) በገገኝታ ቃር ተፈ ሲውሪያ ሲባረኝም፡ በሰብ ቃር አ ባረኝም

She was willing to eat others but refuse to eat her own

The above proverbs disregard the kind heartedness of women. For instance, the first proverb provokes that women are too selfish and do not consider her neighbor or others. In Gurage culture like other Ethiopian ethnic groups culture, when a family gets challenges or shortages, they solve it by borrowing from neighbors. Good neighbors are measured through their right response. They live together by sharing what they have. However the proverb shows that a woman who knocks her neighbor door takes all her neighbor food and feed her husband by letting them to sleep without diner. This shows the selfishness and greediness of women. The second proverb shows that because of her greed she take care of her materials and foods; however she is ready and interested to extravagant others property. The proverb evokes that when she is asked to eat something from what she stored she refused, but when somebody invited her she opened her mouth.

Representation of women as a housewife

15) የምሽት ሞት በቃቀት

A wife's death is in the kitchen

16) አንቻ እቢድቢድ ዴንጋ አዳኝነድ

Women stay at home and let the men govern

The above proverb reflects that women come to this world to spend her life at home. In Gurage community like other Ethiopian ethnic groups, works related to preparing food, rising children and other house works are done by women. For example, the proverb (15) shows as women spend their life in the kitchen until they die. It is known that people's final destination is death and it is not known where and how. However, the place where women died is predetermined wherever she lives and whatever she has (living conditions) which is her kitchen. In other words, according to the first proverb, women are born to raise children, to keep the house, to prepare food, and to do house works like a servant. This shows that women are restricted to work at home. They don't have any opportunity to work outside the home so that they are urged to stay at home till death. Proverb (16) also strongly abandons women's capability and desire to work outside house. It shows that women are born to stay at home and have skill to do only house works. Whereas, outside positions or works which needs decision should have to be done by men. Women are not allowed to participate and give ideas in such activities. In other words, the proverb restricts positions related to leading/ governing to men and house works to women. Generally, the above proverbs evoke that Gurage community discriminate women through their role which is only keeping house.

To sum up the negative representation of women in Gurage proverbs, the finding shows that the community represented women as housewives, greedy, incapable in trade and outside works, feed in teamwork, foolish, immature and physically week.

Positive Representation of Women in Gurage Proverbs

As it is observed in the above proverbs, women are represented negatively in the actions whether they do or not. They are undermined, criticized and overestimated in the proverbs. Even though using these negative expressions decrease in the current context, many people use them in their daily communication. However, there are also some Gurage proverbs that represent women positively. Some of the proverbs are presented as follows.

Representation of women as they are devoted and committed

17) አዶት የትከና ትከ የረገና

Mother for her child, the child for his tomorrow

18) አዶት አግር ትከ ሻግር

Mother is like a donkey while the son is hard like the center of eucalyptus tree

19) ምስ ይበሬ ምሽት ትሰርቅ

To feed her husband, the wife steals.

20) አዶት ባናበች የምዘመዘች

Even though mother does not give, she worries too much.

21) አዶት በሞተቸሜ አታፎይ

Mother did not get rest, even she died.

These expressions demonstrate mothers' commitment to their family. For example, proverb (17) describes that mothers always think about their children. They worry about what they feed to their kids; however, the children do not concern about their mother rather the children think about themselves or their future. Even they have extra materials or food they do not want to share to their mothers who are in need. When children get more food, they ask their mother to put it in a safe place to eat it the next day. By the same token, mothers are regarded as a donkey in proverb (18). In this proverb donkeys are represented as a hard worker. A mother works like a donkey to serve her family. But, the proverb elaborates that kids are as hard as the center of red eucalyptus tree since they are not interested to help their mother at work. This indicates that they do not take care of their parents as equally as their parents do so.

Besides, proverb (19) indicates that wives are devoted to feed their husband. It is clearly known that in Ethiopia in general and in Gurage in particular women are accountable to prepare food for their family. For this reason, they could borrow from neighbors if she had a shortage. If her neighbors do not lend, she could be urged to steal in order to offer food for her husband. Though in the Gurage culture cheating is strongly condemned, she dares to do such kind of things for her family. Similarly proverb (20) elaborates that even though mothers do not be able to offer anything for her children, she cannot stop thinking about her child. Similarly proverb (21) states mothers' extreme commitment for their children. They think a lot about their children in whatever situation they are. The proverb prolongs their devotion even after death. This shows as they are restless.

Proverbs that represent women as motivator

22) ስርም አንደነሰ ምሽራ አገፓ ከረ ደነሰ

A man who never danced before dances when he gets married.

23) ምሽት አድፋፈረቸን ሞድ አይፈካ

The man who is encouraged by his wife does not fear death.

These expressions indicate that women are motivators. In Gurage culture, the community gives higher respect for marriage since it is believed that it is the age in which the son reaches maturity, gets his partner, start a new life and take the responsibility to lead his new family. So that, in Proverb (22), the person is glad so much and could not control his feeling in his wedding day that is why he starts dancing who never did in his life. Furthermore, proverb (23) demonstrates that when a woman motivates a man, he acts as he is brave and strong. Even though the man was a coward when a woman order him to do something, he avoids his fear and start to defend challenges. Whatever it is and to what extent it is challenging no one can stop him to do it as long as he is ordered by his wife. In other words, these proverbs are recited to prove the expressions that "there is a strong woman behind every strong man". On the other hand, these proverbs indicates that men are kind, easily deceived, exposed themselves for danger and obedient for women into death if the women push them to do anything.

Proverbs that show women's kindness as mothers

24) አዶት ኤነቸወ ቤት ጠነዋው

A home without a mother is dark

25) አዶት ፎስመሂታ ጭዛው

Mother, even her fart is medicine.

The above proverbs describe that women are indispensable for their family existence. They reflect how much mothers are necessary to lead a proper life. Proverb (24), states that a home without a mother is like darkness. The proverb gives a great value for mother, and without a mother in home life is frightening as darkness. Here, the darkness symbolizes hopelessness and helplessness of the family.

In addition, the second proverb describes the value of mothers for their children. In Gurage culture, polygamy was common like other African countries. For this reason children have a chance to live with their step mothers. But, according to Gurage community perception, it is advisable that children should have to live and rise with their mothers. Thus, in proverb (25), mothers are regarded as medicine for their children.

DISCUSSION

This study discussed on the representation of women in Western Gurage proverbs. The finding shows that women are more dominantly represented negatively in Gurage proverbs. They are denoted as greedy, feeble in team work, lack intelligence and immature. These expressions are a powerful capital that is used to construct and construe reality hence influencing change in social structures and human relationships. Some works on discourse analysis and gender and language state that our language use reflects social status and the power imbalances (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003; Mills, 2004). The ways people use language, their lexical choices, order of discourse and use of space can be destructive to gender equality. Language use is related to the situation of where and how it is used determine the ideology. Scholars like Wodak and Chilton (2005, p. 170) argue the fact that discourse does ideological work since the goal of economic and social development in which social justice will be realized. To consolidate this view, Dominguez, (2010, p. 50) also states that "Values and beliefs are codified and manifested in all aspects of linguistic communication, such as oral traditions, popular expressions, shared vocabulary, conversational rules and modes of interaction, and even linguistic modes of creativity" This shows that, proverbs are means to reflect the beliefs of people and using these proverbs one can understand the perception and attitude of once society regarding gender.

The finding of the study revealed that even though men accept women's strength and ability to protect their children motivate men to act as brave and support their family positively, the place of women in the community is not lower than a man's place. Gender studies show that women have been oppressed (Wall, 1992, p. 116). In short, the study illustrates that the superiority of men over women by putting psychological pressure and biasness is reflected in Gurage proverbs.

CONCLUSION

The main purpose of this study was to collect, interpret and analyze the representation of women in Gurage proverbs. Accordingly, in this research attempts have been made to make a descriptive analysis of gender-based oral traditions with special reference to proverbs. To collect the proverbs, appropriate data gathering tools were used: interviews and documents. The data collected for this study shows that women are depicted both negatively and positively in Gurage community. Based on the analysis of the data, the following conclusion is made:

- The study shows that Gurage proverbs depict women negatively as incapable in trading and poor in work in which it needs decision.
- Women also negatively represented as physically weak, poor in teamwork, greedy, immature and foolish in Gurage proverbs.
- In this study the findings exposed positive images of women using proverbs, but the study showed the imbalance between the negative and positive attitudes. Women are portrayed positively only in a very few instances: good in being motherhood, motivator of her husband, devoted and committed that urge women to home. All in all, positive representations are given for mothers and wives and it excludes youths and unmarried women.
- Efforts should be made to educate society about the damaging expressions while maintaining and supplementing the positive practice.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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