

Categorical Representation Of Women As The Second Sex: A Sociolinguistic Study Of Hindi Proverbs As Carriers Of Gender Partisanship

Srishti Chauhan (M.Phil.)^{1*}

Srishti Chauhan is a PhD research scholar from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. She holds an M.Phil. from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi and is UGC NET qualified. She is an avid researcher and the broad areas of her research interest include gender, language, linguistics, sociolinguistics, discourse, culture and education.

“One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.”

-Simone de Beauvoir²

Abstract:

Language is a perennial part of human existence. Not only is it conducive to our cognitive competence but also renders an insight into its social bearing. It is, therefore, probable for routine concepts to be interpreted differently by speakers of different languages. One such aspect where language influences our consciousness is gender. If gender is continuously asserted in a language, then it could be postulated that employment of that language invariably impacts our thoughts, attitudes and perceptions of women and men.

Proverbs in any language serve as reflective tools that impart codified knowledge about a society and its speakers. They are indeed the mirror images of the socio-cultural norms and beliefs of the society in which that language is being spoken. In the context of the present paper, the numerous proverbs available to us in the Hindi language, in all likelihood, are an outcome of observations made about life over the years and imparted across future generations. A profound review, however, of many of these proverbs would reveal how gender prejudice is both lucidly as well as obscurely practiced in everyday discourse and aids our biased conception of gender that is invidious towards women. The hypothesis of linguistic relativity, also known as the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis is the most straightforward sociolinguistic theory in this regard. It puts forward the idea that our thoughts, perceptions and actions are relative to the language we speak. Therefore, the present paper aims at exploring one of the various dimensions of the Hindi language, namely proverbs, with respect to their ability to affect our cognition regarding gender and shape our ideas about femininity and masculinity. Consequently, this paper intends to unveil our skewed cognizance of the female gender by critically examining 10 Hindi proverbs.

Keywords: Sexism, Hindi language, Hindi proverbs, Gender inequality, Linguistic relativity.

INTRODUCTION:

Language and gender have always been a popular domain for research in sociolinguistics. Language as the reflection of the values and beliefs of the Hindi speaking community is a crucial propagator of discrimination against women resulting in a sexist view of gender. Gender as a psychological notion is an ineluctable part of every human experience that gets constantly mediated through our use of language.

A proverb is a simple and perspicacious, traditional saying that articulates a perceived truth based on prudence or common sense and experience. They are a unique feature of language. They assist people in making sense and meaning of life and act as guiding principles of the operating mechanism of the society.

Sexism is the accepted conviction or mindset that disseminates the idea of innate superiority, higher competence and value of one sex over the other. A language is sexist when the expressions and utterances that it encompasses, showcase disparity between genders or obliterate or underplay either gender. Sexism in Hindi, however, especially refers to the phenomenon of discrimination against women. Linguistic sexism is when language favors one gender while degrading the other.

According to Jennifer (1993), apart from stereotypical attitudes towards men and women, language also reflects the mode of thinking of the community that speaks it. In consonance with the aforementioned Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, the structure of the language we speak, determines our worldview. In the words of Edward Sapir, “language is a guide to social reality.

^{1*}Research Scholar, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, Email: srish.chauhan@gmail.com, Mobile: 9871857682

² Beauvoir, S. de. (2015). The Second Sex. Vintage Classics.

It powerfully conditions all our thinking about social problems and processes” (Sapir, 1929). Essentially, the real world to the greatest extent, unconsciously thrives upon the peculiar language habits of a group or a community. (Sapir, 1929). Consequently, this paper aims at identifying and divulging elements of sexism in Hindi language through the proverbial lens from a feminine point of view.

Hindi Proverbs as Carriers of Gender Partisanship:

In his paper titled, '*Hyperonym, Femininity and Power dynamics: Evidence from Indian Language*', Dutta proclaims that proverbs drawn from other sexist Indian languages like Assamese and Malayalam, explicitly exhibit masculine supremacy and subordination of women in the Indian society. Dutta further avers that proverbs are the consequence of a sociocultural reality which grant a glimpse into the cultural disposition and behavioral patterns of the speech community. In Hindi too, there are ample proverbs that demonstrate stereotypical portrayal of women trivializing or disparaging them.

In the following section, 10 Hindi proverbs have been enumerated. Each proverb has been followed by its English translation. Subsequently, the meaning of each proverb has been stated along with a critical exploration of the manner in which it presents itself as an exponent of female subjugation.

1. Proverb: *Eent ka jawab patthar se dena.*

English translation: A brick (female) thrown, replied back by throwing a stone (male).

Meaning and analysis: The meaning of this proverb is to pay back in the same coin with interest. A brick (*eent*) has the female gender in Hindi language while a stone (*patthar*) is male. So in a situation of a conflict or a combat, to retaliate with a stone (male) in response to a brick (female) means to make a better, more intimidating and fiercer comeback. Even though this proverb might appear innocuous but a deeper inspection into the gender bias at play provides a rather explicit perspective of male superiority over females in terms of power, potential and adequacy.

2. Proverb: *Daayan bhi dus ghar chod ke vaar karti hai.*

English translation: Even a witch (female) spares the nearest neighborhood.

Meaning and analysis: This proverb means that even the most evil female doesn't create havoc for her near and dear ones. According to the ancient Indian folklore, *Daayan*, *chudail*, *pishachini* are all Hindi terms that are typically used for a female who practices black magic and a proponent of irrevocable destruction but in general are used for a female who is even worse than a witch. They can be used in order to ridicule her or subject her to intense contempt for either failing at an act of compliance or non-fulfilment of her obligations as woman. The concern here, is not whether the woman in question, is right or wrong but the extent of humiliation that can be thrust upon a her for not following conventions. This proverb is not only derogatory to womanhood but also invades their being in a way that is abominable.

3. Proverb: *Kala akshar bhains barabar.*

English translation: To someone who is illiterate, a letter in black ink is nothing but a buffalo (female).

Meaning and analysis: This proverb is used to refer to an individual who is illiterate. It literally means that for a person who doesn't know how to read or write, a letter written in black ink is as good as a buffalo in front of him. In other words, for him/her there is no difference between black letters and a buffalo who is also black. Illiteracy in appropriate contexts is something undesirable and prone to mockery. The association of illiteracy with a buffalo that has a female gender in the Hindi language, resonates with the fact that something like illiteracy can be analogous to the female gender. Therefore, this proverb demonstrates a vivid image of male hegemony.

4. Proverb: *Ghar ki murgi daal barabar.*

English translation: Home-made chicken (female) is no better than the lentils (female) one eats every day.

Meaning and analysis: The meaning of this proverb is that self-possession is always undermined while possessions of others invariably seem better. *Murgi* is female chicken while *daal* (lentils) has the female gender in the Hindi language. The gender prejudice present in this proverb is twofold. Firstly, the depiction of the female gender as a commodity to be possessed and secondly, the comparison between the two entities belonging to the female gender with one being better than the other.

5. Proverb: *Daan ki bachiya ke daant nahin dekhe jaate.*

English translation: One should not look at the teeth of the calf (female) that one receives as donation.

Meaning and analysis: This proverb means that one cannot assess something one receives as donation. *Bachiya* is female calf in Hindi. The presentation of a female calf as a commodity being used for donation is problematic at two levels. To begin with, it attributes the notion of possession to the female gender and further deteriorates its status by declaring that since it has been received as donation, it is not something that should be inspected for its value. At first, this analysis might come across as overtly critical but by the virtue of being a gendered language, Hindi impacts how and what we think and learn about gender through seemingly insignificant daily interactions.

6. Proverb: *Aankh ka (male possessive marker) tara.*

English translation: Star of one's eye

Meaning and analysis: This proverb is used for someone whom one cherishes above all the others. It can also be translated as apple of one's eye. The use of male possessive marker *ka* for positive affirmations is blatant display of gender prejudice. This is not to say that the above proverb must be replaced by the female possessive marker *ki* but the intention here is to indicate that because of the nature of the Hindi language, this proverb cannot be syntactically used for a female and that's unjustified.

7. Proverb: *Kaleje ka tukda.*

English translation: Part of one's liver.

Meaning and analysis: This proverb is used for someone who is deeply loved. Again, the male possessive marker *ka* being used to refer to someone who is so treasured that one considers them a part of an organ without which the human body cannot function, is discriminatory towards the female gender. Being immensely loved and valued should not be the privilege to be savored by any one gender.

8. Proverb: *Muqaddar ka sikandar* (male).

English translation: Master (male) of one's own fate.

Meaning and analysis: This proverb refers to an individual who is considered the master of one's own fate, one who paves his own way. In this proverb too, the possessive male marker *ka* makes it difficult for females relate to it. As a result, Hindi speaking females can remain devoid of conceptualizing themselves as individuals who can take their fate in their own hands and can act independent of authoritarian clasps.

9. Proverb: *Ghar ka chirag.*

English translation: The lamp that illuminates the house.

Meaning and analysis: This proverb is essentially used for a male child among Hindi speakers. It means a family member of the next posterity. In the Indian system of kinship, a son is regarded as the one who would take the familial legacy to the fore, the lamp that would illuminate a kin's future. This Hindi proverb is sexist not only in the sense that it warrants the worth of a male child over a female child but also in the sense that it highlights the patriarchal dominance that makes the females aware of their position in their families and in the society at large.

10. Proverb: *Khoda pahad* (male) *nikli chuhiya* (female mouse).

English translation: To dig a mountain (male) only to discover a mouse (female).

Meaning and analysis: This proverb is used to refer to a situation wherein one envisages acquisition of great fortune only to discover that all his anticipation and hard work was in vain. A mountain (*pahad*) has the male gender in the Hindi language while *chuhiya* is used to refer to a female mouse. The proverb illustrates gender partisanship by assigning the traits of being dominating by size, hardworking and visionary to the male gender and reducing the female gender to a meagre result of that extensive hard work and prophetic vision.

CONCLUSION:

An analytical view of the Hindi proverbs can reveal how language can shape one's ideas about self that include one's understanding of masculinity and femininity. However, language reform is conceivable but it is a gradual process. In accord with the Sapir-Whorf theory of linguistic relativity, that is, our worldview is shaped by the language we speak, we can discerningly question and profoundly ponder upon the possibility of reflecting our world through our choice of language and in turn injecting the social system with varied ways of performing gender. New coinage of words and phrases and alternative usage already prevalent expressions can lead to minimize, if not completely eradicate the sexist disposition of the Hindi language. If sexist thoughts are a repercussion of the social, communicated via language, then it is language itself that gives us the power to replace these sexist thoughts with feminist ones to not only break the vicious cycle of gender discrimination but also to bring about a gender equilibrium in the society.

REFERENCES:

- [1]. Beauvoir, S. de. (2015). *The Second Sex*. Vintage Classics.
- [2]. Bosmajian, H. A. (1972). *The Language of Sexism. etc: A Review of General Semantics*, 29(3), 305–313. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42576459>.
- [3]. Coates, J. (1993). *Women, Men and Language*. London: Longman.
- [4]. Dutta, H. (n.d.). *Hyperonym, Femininity and Power dynamics: Evidence from Indian Languages*. Retrieved from www.academia.edu.
- [5]. Lakoff, G. (1987). *Women, Fire and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal About the Mind*. Chicago: University of Chicago.
- [6]. Lakoff, R. (1975). *Language and Women's Place*. New York: Harper and Row.
- [7]. Mills, S. (2008). *Language and Sexism*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- [8]. Ponyton, C. (1985). *Language and Gender: Making the Difference*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [9]. Sapir, E. (1929). *The Status of Linguistics as a Science*. *Language*, 5(4), 207–214.