

Thematic Analysis of Oromo Proverbs Said About Women

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to look at the representation of women in the Oromo proverbs and to evaluate the awareness of the society about the effects of these proverbs on women. To achieve this goal, an attempt was made to collect proverbs that refer to women. The data was collected from pre documented books because of the inconvenience of data collection in the field due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The collected data was translated from the original language 'Afaan Oromoo' to the target language 'English' and finally analyzed and interpreted qualitatively. From the result, women are portrayed both positively and negatively in Oromo proverbs, and the image of a mother and wives are positive. They are represented as excellent house makers and obedient servants of their family. This study, also found out that women are perceived negatively and disrespected in Oromo proverbs. Male dominance and the inferior position and the low status of women are clearly observed. In these proverbs, women are perceived as ignorant, dependent, weak, irresponsible, unpredictable, and as inferior members of their community. In general, the actual characteristics of women are considered as nothing and ideal behaviors are disseminated in proverbs and in cultural trends. The transmission of these proverbs has a contribution to the perpetuation of the negative images of women and this causes women's negative self-image and their low participation in different social affairs in their community. Therefore, educating women, giving awareness creation training about women's equality to the society, increasing women's participation, and discouraging the use of the proverbs that socialize the inferior status of women may be a solution to create a better positive image of women in the society.

Key words: Oromo, thematic, proverbs, women

1. Introduction

Folklore is the traditional art, literature, knowledge, and practice that are disseminated largely through oral communication and behavioral example. Every group with a sense of its own identity shares, as a central part of that identity, folk traditions—the things that people traditionally believe (planting practices, family traditions, and other elements of worldview), do (dance, make music, sew clothing), know (how to build an irrigation dam, how to nurse an ailment, how to prepare barbecue), make (architecture, art, craft), and say (personal experience stories, riddles, song lyrics). As these examples indicate, in most instances, there is no hard-and-fast separation of these categories, whether in everyday life or in folklorists' work.

The word "folklore" names an enormous and deeply significant dimension of culture. Considering how large and complex this subject is, it is no wonder that folklorists define and describe folklore in so many different ways. Try asking dance historians for a definition of "dance," for instance, or anthropologists for a definition of "culture." No one definition will suffice—nor should it.

As to Barbro (2001) 'Folklore' has four basic meanings. First, it denotes oral narration, rituals, crafts, and other forms of vernacular expressive culture. Second, folklore, or 'folkloristic,' names an academic discipline devoted to the study of such phenomena. Third, in everyday usage, folklore sometimes describes colorful 'folkloric' phenomena linked to the music, tourist, and fashion industries. Fourth, like a myth, folklore can mean falsehood.

The focus of the study is the oral literary genre of folklore which is proverbs. Oral literature is a highly wide-scoped concept of any society's oral tradition. Bascom,(1968) stated that verbal arts serve to keep cultural continuity from one generation to another generation. Proverbs are one of the various genres of folklore. According to Finnegan, (1970), proverbs are very brief sayings with extremely compact messages shared by a large number of people, and they 'tersely' communicate social truths. It is also agreed upon by many scholars that proverbs, in previous times, and even today, especially, in the non-literate (traditional) society, play a great role in the people's culture of educating one another; appreciating, commenting on, and criticizing behaviors, religions, norms, values, leadership and in bringing up their offspring according to their norm. In other words, a proverb is a mirror in which its society observes its whole being.

According to D'Angelo, (<http://links.jstor.org>.) "Almost every nation has its share of proverbs and sayings." He asserted that "Because proverbs are so familiar, they often win uncritical acceptance from the audience..." Thus, like any other African society, the Oromo have their own oral tradition, of which proverbs are the popular ones that elders most often use as a spice of their speech in every context of life.

Formerly, the oral tradition of the Oromo people was not found in a written form because of the political influence of the country on Oromo literature. These days, however, few of them are collected and found in a written form only in very limited sites and they belong to only a limited area of the people in the region. Since proverbs are linked with every aspect of people's lives, it is difficult to study all types of proverbs in society at a time. As a result, for the time being, there are few works that analyze the positive as well as the negative effects of proverbs on women. Proverbs have unlimited importance in the Oromo, it is difficult to say they have no pitfalls. The Oromo have a special place for their mothers, wives, and sisters with which they express their respect to them. On the contrary, as it is obviously found in the oral tradition of many societies, there are many proverbs that undermine Oromo women in general. However, most of the researchers focus on proverbs undermining women than investigating proverbs praising women. It is, therefore, with this input that the researcher is initiated to explore the Oromo proverbs stating women's positively as well as negatively to fill the gap.

2. Review of Related Literature

2.1 Proverbs

Proverbs reflect African common ideas, themes, suppositions, and truths; they also reveal creations (values) unique to and differentiated by ethnicity, socio-cultural, and geographical factors (Courlander, 1975). Therefore, it necessitates defining them in accordance with their own properties that differentiate them from the rest of folklore genres. Finnegan, (1970) and Sumner, (1995) have claimed the attempt to define a proverb to be so difficult and that there is no clear cut definition of a proverb. In spite of this claim, many scholars including these two have defined it in different ways. This widely varied sense of definition is of course initiated by the popular functions they serve in society. Below are some of these definitions.

Finnegan defined a proverb as a saying which has got a fixed form and known by its brief, meaningful and flavorful nature that has the popular acceptance of the realities communicated in it (1970), whereas Achebe, (1974) has related proverbs with a 'palm-oil' to indicate that proverbs are the spices of a speech, through which people exchange a different variety of issues (messages) using few words. The Oromo also have expressed the idea of 'palm-oil' in their proverb, "dubbiin makmaaksa hinqabneefi ittoon soogidda hinqanbne hinmi'aawu." which means 'a speech without a proverb and a stew without salt are tasteless.'

Okpewho, (1992. P.226) has defined it as, "...a folk wisdom expressed with terseness and charm." The "terseness" implies a certain economy in the choice of words and sharpness of focus, while the "charm" conveys the touch of literary or poetic beauty in the expression. Parallel with this point, the Oromo proverb is said to be framed in brevity, where metaphor, symbolism, satire, irony, and the like are concentrated within a single line of a proverb (Eshete, 2007).

Others defined a proverb as: "short and pithy sentences forming a popular saying, and expressing some results of the experienced life in a keen and lively fashion."; Coyle (1991,p.80); "A short pithy saying which embodies a general truth. It is related in form and content to maxims and aphorism." (Cuddon, 1982, p.539).

All the above definitions given by different scholars show the various characteristics of proverbs in common such as short, brief, withy, the popular saying, terse, pithy, flavorful,...etc. are some of the different terms these scholars used to refer to proverbs. Hence, since it is difficult to have the exact and real definition of a proverb, in general, it is better to call it a noble genre of especially, African oral tradition in general and Oromo oral tradition in particular, which carries the wisdom of a people, that has been distilled from experiences made over centuries.

2.1.1 The Functions of Proverbs

Regardless of their difference in time and place, proverbs which are short and witty expressions are similar all over the world. This is mostly because of the fact that people are fundamentally and psychologically the

same regardless of their continental and color differences (Bascom, 1992; Sumner, 1995; Finnegan, 1970). This can imply that proverbs like their similarity across different cultures also have similar functions.

The reason for the similarity of the proverbs according to Sumner, (1995, p. 53) is the fact that human experiences are almost similar. To use Sumner's words, "Love, sad, death, hunger and fear are the basic factors that rule mankind, primitive or cultured; are factors uninfluenced by environment or civilization." Similarly, many authors indicated that in most traditional African societies proverbs may serve similar functions, even in nearly the same meanings that are different only for their actual context of performance than due to their content and attitude (Lindfors, 1977; Finnegan, 1970; Ben Amos, 1975a). However, as far as purposes of use can be different based on the variation in context within which they are performed, it is important to treat the function of Oromo proverbs in their own socio-cultural context

Like most African people, the Oromo also have a great value for their proverbs in that they compare it with a salt in a stew in the same manner that the Igbo society compares with the palm-oil, and the Chaga who indicated this in their proverb, "Have four big possessions: land, cattle, water and proverbs" (Finnegan, 1970. p. 413). Regarding the value the Oromo have for their proverbs, Sumner wrote: "Since the beginning of my ministry among the [Oromo] populations, I have been struck by the importance given to proverbs by these people, who made a vast usage of them." He added that the proverbs then, stand as a storehouse of the accumulated experience, knowledge, and philosophy of the people." Evidently, therefore, the Oromo do not appreciate their proverbs for anything.

Besides the major functions of proverbs mentioned above which are also the functions of other folkloric forms Finnegan (1992) put the functions of proverbs into two and these are the didactic and aesthetic functions.

2.1.1.1 Didactic Functions

Didactic functions of proverbs imply the educative functions through which proverbs express, promote, and recognize the beliefs and customs; care for and reinforce morality and tradition by giving them higher value Chesaina (1997), Miruka (1004), Bascom (1965). Taddese (2004,p. 46) has illustrated this in his thesis: "Thus, its art both material and moral, inspirations and frustrations, customary practices, social norms, in short, the sum total of its realities of life can be observed and learned through proverbs. In doing so, proverbs play the role of bridging the past socio-cultural values to the present ones."

Besides its function of cultural continuity in promoting beliefs and customs, the didactic function of proverbs serves people to teach morals, diligence, and purity and, ridicule laziness, snobbishness, immorality, rebelliousness, and other evil behaviors Finnegan, (1992) and Miruka, (1994). That's why, in the case of Oromo people, (especially elders), they often use proverbs and other genres to teach their children about their past, honesty, politeness, faithfulness, and to criticize inappropriate behavior in general. This shows that the educative function of proverbs is widely common among the Oromo too.

2.1.1.2 Aesthetic Functions

Aesthetic as the name speaks has something to do with beauty. In the above context, the beauty is particularly that of communication or speech. To indicate the beauty proverb adds to speech, the Oromo use the proverb “Dubbiin mammaaksa hinqabneefi ittoon soogidda hinqabne hinminyaa’u.” which means ‘a speech without a proverb and a stew without salt are tasteless.’

What is implied in the above proverb is the aesthetic value of proverbs in communication.

Finnegan (1970) and Sumner (1995) have pointed out that proverbs have no separate social condition for their performance. But, they can be used in speech and action at any time, and therefore, are not meant for recreation or entertainment. Thus, the aesthetic function is attributed to the concept of palm-oil in the Igbo and the salt in a stew in the Oromo, where proverbs are used to give color and pragmatic force to formal discussions and an ordinary conversation.

2.2 Women in Oromo Proverbs

Proverbs are free for any person to utter and to listen to but it is a false assumption that only male elders are entitled to use proverbs. The authors called it a false assumption, since, in almost, all community ceremonies, proverbs are used. But it may be noted here that according to Sena’s (2008) study the traditional assumption is that older people (men) are considered to be experts in the use of proverbs.

Oromo proverbs are like any other African Proverbs and forward roles in the depiction of women. Of course, as pointed out earlier in the preceding section, proverbs are expressions of wisdom acquired through reflection, experience observation, and general knowledge. This is also true in the case of Oromo proverbs (Sumner, 1995). Proverbs are intimately related to the culture of a given society. Thus, proverbs could be a major source to examine the image of women in Oromo society.

2.3. Feminism

Feminism is a term that has acquired a number of different meanings. It can be defined as a shared reflection and advocacy of equality between men and women (www.wlv.ac.UK/ale180femin-htm). For Richards, on the other hand, feminism is the full social, political, and economic equality of women and men. It is also stated by Guerin, et. al. (1998), as feminism aims at disclosing the patriarchal system together with its resulting hatred towards women and evaluates the social, cultural, and psychosexual manifestation of literature and literary criticism.

Feminists’ aim is to promote and encourage a female’s tradition of writing; to interpret their literary works in order not to be ignored by the male point of view; to rediscover old texts; to analyze female writers and their works from the female point of view; to fight sexism in literature; and to increase awareness of the sexual politics of language and style (Guerin, et al. 1998). Therefore, the feminists’ movement is engaged in the wholesale attack against the sex-role stereotypes, and their consequences. In fact, (Lewis, 1974) <http://www.jstor.org>) confirmed this saying, “The function is revolutionary: the aim is to activate and to

initiate change...” And besides this, she indicated that the feminist’s movement has utilized folklore material, applying it to the struggle for female equality.

According to many feminists, changing the old history through awareness creation among the society and revision of images in the past will lead to the solution. Farrer, (1975), assures this idea as, “The consciousness of men as well as of women was raised by feminist literature and this led to the current revival of interest in women’s rights in all aspects. In short, a look into feminists’ view patriarchal system together with its resulting hatred towards women and evaluates the social, cultural, and psychosexual manifestation of literature and literary criticism can help in the process of searching for a solution to gender-biased attitudes and women’s invisibility in society. So in the theme of Oromo proverbs let us look at what way women expressed and its effect too.

3. Method of the Study

The study is qualitative research, it comprises textual analysis methods together with relevant conceptual tools and frameworks and therefore it is analytical. Different books in which novels are documented have been read and examined critically. According to Abiy (2009), qualitative research involves and seeks to describe various aspects of behavior and other factors studied in the social sciences and humanities. In qualitative research data are often in the form of descriptions, rather than numbers. Document analysis, the process of using any kind of documents, can be used as a methodology in qualitative research as a singular method of research or as a supplementary form of inquiry. Hence textual analysis method is the best fit with the objective of the research since the main focus of the research is analyzing the theme of Oromo proverbs said for women.

Purposive sampling technique is used to select the proverbs documented in different books that represented women. The proverbs selected were specific for women and they are considering both positive and negative expressions. The study employs secondary data. The secondary data and the main focus of the research were on the proverbs documented in different books that are related to women. This has been done because of the inconvenient situation created by COVID-19 to collect data from the first hand through filed work.

After the data collection translation is taking place. The data was translated from the original language Afaan Oromo to the target language English. Then classification took place based on its content and analyzed thematically using qualitative method. Finally, interpretations were given based on different theories and literature.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Proverbs Said for Women Positively

Some proverbs indicate that women are more valuable than men. They describe women as life bearers, nurseries, cherishers, and they care for life since all human life passes through their wombs. Let us see proverbs positively expressing women as mothers and wives.

4.1.1 Women as a Mother

There are proverbs that have depicted women as lovable, generous, and tolerant (Berhanu, 2008). Some proverbs consider women the most important member of the family. For instance,

Namni haadha qabu nama Waaqa qabu
The one who has a mother is the one who has God

From the proverb, the value of a mother is expressed as God. This shows how much mothers are valuable and respectful in Oromo society. Truly speaking it is difficult for all of us to express the value of mothers using any word less than in the proverb stated. Mothers are very important in any family and the base for human life continuity.

Haadha dhabuu mannaa, haadha dhabduu wayyaa
Having a destitute mother is better than not

The proverb says 'Haadha dhabuu mannaa, haadha dhabduu wayyaa' shows that mother is greater than everything. According to this proverb, psychologically somebody who has a mother is not equal to someone who does not have a mother.

Haadhaa fi lafatu nama danda'a
Mother and ground hold everybody

The proverb depicted that both mother and land have enough resistance to hold any good and bad things such as happiness, sadness, traits, ill-behaviors, and so on of somebody. Mother can correct her sons' ill-acts and ill-doing because she is a mother. When we look at the behavior of land, it has no negative response for any person whatever the person or his did is. In a similar way, a mother not responds negatively to her child whatever they and their behavior is. She is always looking for her child as a correct person and kid. That is why the Oromo proverb says 'mother and ground hold somebody'.

Haadha duute mannaa, haadha maraatte wayya.
Mad mother is better than a dead mother

According to this proverb, let alone a healthy mother, even the existence of a mad mother is better than not having a mother at all. Even though she is not healthy the presence of her mother gives mental satisfaction. From the concept, the mother who didn't give any support for her family has a good place for her child. The relationship between mothers and children is not connected in advantage; it is innate.

In short, despite the fact that such proverbs play their own role in the process of the socialization of the biased attitudes of a given society towards the image of women as mothers is positive and the people also

use them exactly to mean what the proverbs say about mothers. This idea goes in line with the works of different researchers like Jaylan, (2005).

4.1.2 Women as a wife

In the proverbs of Oromo society, women are depicted both positively as a wife in similar to mothers. Below are a number of proverbs that depict women positively.

Nyaanni soogidda malee, manni dubartii malee hin bareedu.

A house without a woman is like food without salt.

The proverb “a house without a woman is like food without salt” shows how much women are important in the house. It describes a house as a test less and values less entity without the presence of women. So, women give meaning for meaning fewer affairs when they are present in the home. According to Ethiopian cultures specifically, Oromo`s males and child are not interested to be at home when mothers are not there. As the food without salt is not swallowed for every one of us, the house also not give happiness without women.

Niitiin utubaa manaati

A wife is the pillar of a house

When we look at a house, every part of the roof is laying on a pillar. It holds every aspect of that house and makes to stand in an appropriate way. If that pillar lacks its strength the house became useless and became destroyed. The proverb “a wife is the pillar of a house” depicts a similar idea by replacing women with house pillars. This indicates that most of the family responsibilities are handled by women. This can be started by giving birth. She carries a baby in her womb for nine months and three years in her hands. Also, she has responsibility for all home duties and management. The men responsibility is out-door. Therefore, the strength of given family life is measured through the wife's strength; if she is good the family will be good if not vies-versa.

Dubartiin faaya manaati

A woman is a jewel of a house

This proverb also portrayed the importance of women in the house. Her women are described as an ornament. Which is very valued and expensive, the jewel is not used by any layperson since it is costly. The place given for women is like an ornament that every person cannot deserve. As we keep our jewel at a very ideal place women also imagined like that by Oromo society. It is a very respectful and great consideration for women.

Generally, all of the above proverbs show how much women are important in house holding. In the proverbs, women are depicted to be very important members of the community, especially for their husbands. As far as the skill of housekeeping and feeding a family is solely the duty of women in many patriarchal societies, it is not surprising if women expertise in this area and are praised and appreciated for

their good performances. Similarly, from these proverbs, it is possible to deduce that everyone performs well, activities at which she/he has experience for a longer period of time. That is, women, as they were trained to perform reproductive works at home, they are excellent at the field while men were trained to perform productive works outside the home, they are excellent or very good at their field too.

Therefore, had it not been for the biased desire of the patriarchal society to put women under the subjection of men, the above fact by itself should have led them to the construction of the attitude that women and men are two complementary elements of a community, not inferior or superior to one another. Besides, these proverbs are considered to be the positive portrayals of women only when they are seen from the angle of their literal meaning and under the conditions where this improper and biased work division is internalized as a normal one.

Otherwise, like that of motherhood, all the proverbs show women's identity not as an individual, but in terms of their importance to men and, they still facilitate the conditioning of women's character to internalize the socially constructed domain and status of women. Hence we can consider these proverbs as examples of a positive portrayal of women if and only if the proverbs were used by the people to praise good performance and to reward the behavior for further motivation being unconscious of its adverse effects on the other extreme.

4.2 Proverbs Said for Women Negatively

4.2.1 Disrespecting Women

As there are proverbs that express valuableness of woman as, mother and wife, there are also proverbs which portray woman negatively. Some proverbs are completely against women. Let us see some examples,

Uleefi dubartiin jilbaa gaditti

A stick and women are better when they are handled below the knee

This proverb shows the superiority of men over women. To handle and control women keeping them under the knee is taken as a good way of management. This can be practiced by protecting their right to speak, be out of the house, take responsibility for the economy, make decisions on their family's life and etc. This is because women are disrespected and seen as ignorant to participate in such key issues. So, the idea is blocking access by controlling them not to be out of the power and management of men.

Dhaltuun fardaafi dubartiin ulfina hinbeektu

A female horse and a woman do not know respect

As it is indicated in the above proverb, women are symbolized as a female horse which is an animal. It shows that since women do not know respect it is not necessary to respect them. Here women are assumed as ignorant of respect which is totally opposing their behavior. The knowledge of respect is not given for

some groups or sex; it is a common character for all human beings. From the concept of the proverb, one can easily deduce how much women are undermined by society.

Nadheeniifi faradeen galgala baddi

Women and a horse are helpless at the old age

From the proverb women, life became bad at their old age like a horse. This means that one can use them at their young age or when they are strong and through when they lose their energy. Here women are taken like an animal that serves human and explained as they are useless at their old age. So, women are supported by men when they are serving them and became helpless at old age. The idea is women are not stand by their self and they are dependent on the men up to the time they can give service. But when we look at its practicality, it is completely not, because women in general Oromo women, in particular, are not such weak and completely dependent on men. Such proverbs are used by men to make women see themselves as incapable people and to give them service for a lifelong.

The contribution of these proverbs to the construction of negative images of women is that being used repeatedly, they condition women themselves to accept as normal, the biased attitude the society has towards them and to act accordingly. In this case, they are trained to accept that they are inferior to men and should take a lower and inferior position in their community.

4.2.2 Women as an Ignorant

In similar to other negative expressions, Oromo proverbs also express women as ignorant. Let we see some examples,

Dubartiin beektuu hinqabdu beekaa deessi malee

A woman is not intelligent, but she gives birth to the intelligent ones

From the proverb, women are not brainy, but they give birth to the brainy ones. The assumption is there are no intelligent women at all so women are totally ignorant. It implies that these intelligent persons are men or males; addressing women's inferiority to their people. But, the reality is far from this idea. As we all know there are a lot of intelligent women across the globe that performs every activity equal to men. Being intelligent is not sex-based; it is common for all as a human being.

Beekumsi dubartii dinqaa olitti

Women are intelligent in the door

The proverbs reveal women and men in different positions, one as the possessor of this oral treasure, proverbs, and others as an oppressed group. The place given for women is in the door which is 'Dinqaa' the section of a room where women put articles, dishes, and other service materials for food. In Oromo society, this section of the room is not allowed for men. So, women are good at cooking and giving other

home services but not in fieldwork. Still, the practical life of Oromo women is not revealing the idea; they are good both in the door and out of the door.

Dubartiin dheertuun dhuma midhaanii hinbeektu

A tall woman does not know the end of the grain

This proverb is to show that the tall woman reaches the grain in the storage easily and gets enough amount of grain for family daily consumption. As she frequently does it, the grain would be finished. Because, there is no problem with her accessibility in relation to her height to the grain, in doing so, she only understands it when it is already empty. This implies that since women are ignorant they have no care for tomorrow and think over what they are doing.

5. Conclusion

Proverbs are one among the genre of oral literature which reveals human social life and world outlook of a specific community. Depending on the characteristics of proverbs; it is possible to comment on the social roles, community roles, sex roles, and individual roles in power relationship structures among human beings. Gender inequality is the denial of equality between men and women which is reflected through cultural trends by using proverbs. Briefly, in the proverbs, there are images of women, men, and community. The world outlook of life, philosophy, and ideology, in general, can be revealed by proverbs of a particular community, but also deep inequality. Thus proverbs are used as a system of inequality delegation between men and women. In general, from the proverb analyzed and interpreted the subsequent conclusion is made:

In Oromo proverbs, women are portrayed both positively and negatively, and the image of a mother and wives are positive. They are represented as excellent house makers and obedient servants of their family. Here, it is important to note that almost all proverbs positively said for women are about their efficiency in the home and not in fields or external duties out of the home. Besides, it was found out that such an expression makes women themselves to accept the inferior position they were given in their society and influence them to act according to the social code of conduct.

This study also found out that women are perceived negatively and disrespected in Oromo proverbs. From the result, male dominance and the inferior position, and the low status of women are clearly observed. In these proverbs, women are revealed as ignorant, dependent, weak, irresponsible, unpredictable, and as inferior members of their community.

In general, the actual characteristics of women are considered as nothing and ideal behaviors are disseminated in proverbs and in cultural trends. Proverbs are glorifying the men's esteem at far distances from women and deny women entire human rights under the coverage of "unquestioned norms". Women are considered as nothing in human social life, like an institution, economic, political, and socially in the

use of proverbs sphere as they are unknowingly consenting to the violation of their human rights. Proverbs are used as cultural tools to conduct oppression and domination and dominate one group of persons, women. Proverbs are portraying women as a social asset that every male can use as much as cultural trends permit them. Most of the proverbs are comparing women with animals like horses and symbolize the bad character.

The transmission of these proverbs has a contribution to the perpetuation of the negative images of women and this causes women's negative self-image and their low participation in different social affairs in their community. Therefore, educating women, giving awareness creation training about women's equality to the society, increasing women's participation, and discouraging the use of the proverbs that socialize the inferior status of women may be a solution to create a positive image of women in society.

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