

REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN THE SUNDANESE PROVERBS

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Abstract

The gender difference is actually not a problem as far as not giving birth gender inequality. However, gender difference has spawned various injustices, especially for women. The phenomenon can be seen in a proverb. Researches both at global level and in Indonesia show that the representations of women in proverbs are very popular. For example, study conducted by Storm (1992), Sunderland (2006), Hussein (2009), Anderson (2012), Wang (2012), Asimeng-Boahene (2013), Lee (2015), Diabah and Amfo (2015) and Mubarok (2016). With viewpoints and different data, the study examines the representation of women as espoused in a number of Sundanese (an ethnic group native to the western part of the Indonesian island of Java) proverbs. The objective is to analyze traditional views on the perceptions and roles of the woman in Sundanese society and explore the interrelation between language, gender and culture. Using a Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) Approach, 7 Sundanese proverbs about women, selected from written sources, are examined. The study shows that women are portrayed in Sundanese proverb as constructions of submissiveness, women as an object of sex and women are portrayed as representation of virtue. Based on these findings, the study concluded that Sundanese proverbs tend to present women in particular stereotypical ways, most of which can be interpreted as derogatory, negative or subservient.

Keywords: Gender, Proverbs, Women, Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis, Patriarchy, Representation.

1. INTRODUCTION

This article examines the representation of women as espoused in a number of Sundanese proverbs. The objective is to analyze traditional views on the perceptions and roles of the woman in Sundanese society and explore the interrelation between language, gender and culture. It is a long-held view that language and culture are intertwined (Diabah and Amfo, 2015, p.3).

More recently, studies in the area of language and gender (e.g. Baxter, 2003; Cameron, 2005; Lazar, 2005; Mills, 2008; Sunderland, 2004) have demonstrated that language can be a critical vehicle in issues of gender construction and deconstruction. This article is an attempt to investigate the nexus between language, gender and culture within the Indonesian context and especially within Sundanese society. It particularly examines the cultural and traditional representations of the female.

Research on proverbs abounds, such as studies are conducted by Storm (1992), Sunderland (2006), Hussein (2009), Anderson (2012), Wang (2012), Asimeng-Boahene (2013), Lee (2015), Diabah and Amfo (2015) and Mubarok (2016). For instance, Anderson (2012) in his study of how proverbs deal with the relationship between and characterization of men and women in a peasant society in Northern Sweden, he argues that 'the gender conceptions found in the proverbs form a system of gender hegemony that supports masculine superiority and feminine subordination' (p. 10). For example, whereas men are the choosers (an active position) in the 'marriage market' – that is, looking for partners for marriage – women are the chosen (a passive position). Such male superiority and female subordination is seen as the idealized relationship between men and women – a point which this study supports. Wang (2012) also looks at sex discrimination in English and Chinese proverbs and comments that both languages exhibit a 'gender-biased ideology' (p. 152) because men are considered superior to and stronger than women. Storm (1992, p.167), his paper discusses traditional Japanese proverbs about women, by examining proverbs about women one can see to some extent how women are perceived in a certain culture. This paper showed how the image of Japanese women can be classified as follows: Women in general: inferiority "*Danson johi*" (Men are treated with respect, women are treated as inferior.); stupidity "*Nyonin ni kenjim nashi*" (There are no wise women.); changeability "*Aki no hiyori to onna no kokoro hi ni shichido kawaru*" (Autumn weather and a woman's mind change seven times a day.); ill-nature "*Onna no nasake ni hebi ga sumu*" (In women's hearts there dwell serpents.); talkativeness "*Onna sannin yoreba kashimashi*" (When three women get together, it is noisy.); weakness "*Onna wa kowaremono*" (Women are fragile things [they must be handled carefully.]); miscellaneous "*Onna no kokoro wa onna shiru*" (Only a woman can understand another woman's mind.). Women in specific roles or situations: wives "*Fusho fuzu*" (The husband initiates, the wife obeys.); mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law "*Yome to shutome, inu to saru*" (The daughter-in-law and the mother-in-law are like a dog and a monkey [they do not get along well.]); widows "*Onna yamome ni hana ga saku*" (A widow decorates herself beautifully [so that she can attract a man.]); prostitutes "*Keisei to tsujikaze niwa awanu ga himitsu*" (Gusts of wind and prostitutes are best never met [once a man meets such a woman, he will be enslaved by her.]); intelligent women "*Onna sakashikute ushi urisokanau*" (If a woman is smart, she will fail to sell cows [women's intelligence leads to failure in various matters.]); beautiful women "*Bijin no owari wa saru ni naru*" (When a beautiful woman becomes old, she becomes ugly like a monkey.) (Storm, 1992, pp.168-173).

On the other hand, Asimeng-Boahene (2013, p.123) looks at the use of African proverbs (with a focus on Akan ones) 'to situate or socially construct African women in both matriarchal and patriarchal systems in Africa'. Through a critical discursive analysis of the narratives and views of 200 Akan women on a selected number of African/Akan proverbs, his findings reveal that 'the use of proverbs has become the tool through which men control positions of social and economic influence by limiting women's participation to domestic spheres' (p. 126). The consequence of this is that women become non-productive dependents on men, which then weakens their bargaining power both at home and within larger society. He demonstrates that women, through these proverbs, are constructed as objects of men's pleasure. Consequently, they are denied the right to their own sexuality and sexual pleasure. Additionally, women are considered as difficult to manage or understand. In spite of the weak representation that is often ascribed to women, they are, ironically, expected to be hard-working. Thus, his findings reveal both negative and positive representations of women. Hussein's (2009) investigation of Ethiopian, Sudanese and Kenyan proverbs. He concluded that there are strong intertextual and intercultural threads between proverbs and the representation of women's roles, statuses and identity, and that the linguistic resources, as found in proverbs, are used to perpetuate inequality. Further, Lee (2015) examination of Chinese Proverbs, his study examines the images of men and women represented in Chinese proverbs as found in a dictionary published in Hong Kong. He shows gender inequality is evident in the stereotypical depiction of women, who are described as dependent on and submissive to men, and who are valued for their physical charm, chastity, domestic roles and ability to bear sons to continue the family line. For men, on the other hand, values are placed on their talents, friendship building and such personal attributes as bravery, modesty and kindness. Men's fondness for women is neutrally or positively portrayed as unrestrained or romantic, reflecting the sexual objectification of women. Male supremacy is also evident in the common use of masculine generic constructions and male-firstness in Chinese proverbs. Diabah and Amfo (2015) also examine the representation of women as espoused in a number of Akan (Niger-Congo, Kwa) proverbs. Their research is to analyze traditional views on the perceptions and roles of the woman in Akan society and explore the interrelation between language, gender and culture. Using a (Feminist) Critical Discursive Approach, 62 Akan proverbs about women, selected from both written and oral sources, are examined. It shows that Akans tend to present women in particular stereotypical ways through the use of these gendered proverbs, most of which can be interpreted as derogatory, negative or subservient.

Research on proverbs especially from Indonesia has been done by Mubarok (2016). He examined women representation in Indonesia proverbs with the focus of ethnolinguistic study. The results showed that in Indonesia proverbs women are described as being talkative; weak; the object of the male; and women are required gentle mannered and polite. One contributing factor is the patriarchal culture which is inherent in the people of Indonesia itself. In this case, the focus in this article is to do a linguistic analysis of selected gendered proverbs, specifically those that include the explicit mention of women. writer examines how women are represented in the proverbs themselves, while noting some of the linguistic strategies employed in the construction of such proverbs. Furthermore, the study examines the representation of women as espoused in a number of Sundanese (an ethnic group native to the western part of the Indonesian island of Java) proverbs. The objective is to analyze traditional views on the perceptions and roles of the woman in Sundanese society and explore the interrelation between language, gender and culture. Using a Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) Approach, 7 Sundanese proverbs about women, selected from written sources, are examined. FCDA has to be adopted because it does share a number of defining features in keeping with its social constructionist origins: the idea of language as social practice; the relation between language and power exactly in analysing intertextualised discourses in spoken interaction, written and other types of text. Furthermore, the author conducted this research because as people living in a patriarchal society, women in Sundanese areas generally play supporting roles to men. Like many cultures, the traditional roles of Sundanese women are mainly taking care of domestic tasks, while the men go out and work to fend for the family. In recent times, however, perceptions of socio-cultural norms and expectations about appropriate gender practices, as well as the social status of many Sundanese women, have changed as a result of education, finance, exposure to cosmopolitan lifestyles and globalization; however, these have not eroded perceptions and expectations of what it means to be an ideal Sundanese woman – submissive, respectful, hardworking, dutiful, etc.

The rest of this article is organized as follows. A brief socio-cultural and linguistic overview of the Sundanese people is followed by a definition of the proverb and consideration of why it is such a pervasive tool for the communication of cultural truisms. The section also examines certain linguistic structures that writer find in these proverbs. Next, the theoretical framework for the analysis of the selected proverbs, Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA), is presented. This is followed by a discussion of the concepts of hegemonic masculinity and femininity. Then, writer look at the data and the methods used, before discussing the representations of women in Sundanese proverbs based on the various identified categories. Furthermore, finish with a discussion of the findings, and then the conclusion.

2. THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

2.1. Sundanese society in Indonesia

There are over 300 ethnic groups in Indonesia (Kuoni, 1999). 95% of those are of Native Indonesian ancestry (Encyclopedia of Modern Asia, 2006). The Sundanese are an ethnic group native to the western part of the Indonesian island of Java. They number approximately 40 million, and are the second most populous of all the nation's ethnicities (Suryadinata et.al, 2003). Although there are some differences, these ethnic groups share many beliefs and socio-cultural practices, some of which are gendered. For instance, as people living in a patriarchal society, women in Sundanese areas generally play supporting roles to men.

Like many cultures, the traditional roles of Sundanese women are mainly taking care of domestic tasks, while the men go out and work to fend for the family. In recent times, however, perceptions of socio-cultural norms and expectations about appropriate gender practices, as well as the social status of many Sundanese women, have changed as a result of education, finance, exposure to cosmopolitan lifestyles and globalization; however, these have not eroded perceptions and expectations of what it means to be an ideal Sundanese woman – submissive, respectful, hardworking, dutiful, etc.

2.2. Proverbs

Proverbs are, by and large, universal phenomena. They permeate communication across societies. Societies collectively take responsibility for the content of proverbs, leaving little room for innovation and individuality (Diabah and Amfo, 2015, p.6). Durkheim (1933, 170–171) defines a proverb as ‘a condensed statement of a collective idea or sentiment relative to a determined category of objects’. Durkheim’s definition demonstrates the collective nature of the proverb; it is the whole society that takes ownership of it. Thus, it is considered the collective view of the community which is reflective of communal thought and takes precedence over individual preferences and opinions. Asante (2002, 4) also suggests that (Akan) proverbs are ‘often an expression of some fact of life deduced from careful observation’. They may be considered a set of cultural heritage, which is reflective of the communal thought regarding an issue at stake.

Fasiku (2006, p. 51) remarks that proverbs constitute ‘a powerful rhetorical device for the shaping of moral consciousness, opinions, and beliefs’. Proverbs from the folk are ‘the mirror of a culture’ (Ennaji, 2008, p. 168), as they can reflect the customs, traditions, values, opinions and beliefs of a particular society. They emanate from people’s experiences, mentality and ways of thinking at a certain point in time. The rich linguistic data found in proverbs enables us to study the cultural beliefs and social values of a society, including its attitudes towards the two genders (Lee, 2015, p. 561).

2.2.1. Simile

A simile involves explicit comparison and the use of words such as ‘like’ and ‘as’. Two entities are compared and certain characteristics of both are considered identical. In addition, the addressee of the proverb is not left to their own imagination as to the exact comparison to make, as the explicitness of the clause that follows in the second part of such proverbs is a clear indication of the specific characteristics expected to be associated with the woman (Diabah and Amfo, 2015, p.7).

2.2.2. Metaphor

Traditionally, a metaphor is considered to be similar to a simile except that the comparison in this case is direct; one entity is described in terms of another. Later research on metaphors (e.g. Lakoff and Johnson, 1980), which led to the evolution and development of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), considers that metaphors are central to human thought. Lakoff (1993: 203) explains that metaphor in contemporary metaphor research suggests a cross-domain mapping; thus, a metaphor ‘is the surface realization of such a cross-domain mapping’. Further, the metaphors are used to reinforce the dominant roles expected of men and the accompanying subdued roles of women as well as their vulnerability and weakness (Diabah and Amfo, 2015, p.7).

2.3. Feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA)

According to Litosseliti (2006), CDA ‘has an explicit interest in making transparent the “hidden agenda” of discourse – which, for instance, may be responsible for creating and sustaining gender inequalities’ (2006, pp.55–56). Wodak, however, describes it as fundamentally ‘interested in not only analyzing opaque but also transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language’ (2002, p.11). Similarly, Van Dijk defines CDA as a ‘discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context’ (2001, 352). CDA therefore critiques social inequalities as reflected in language. In critiquing social inequalities then, CDA’s interest ties in with the emancipatory goal of feminism which is called the Feminist Critical Discourse Analytical (FCDA). Diabah stated FCDA is doing CDA from a feminist perspective (Diabah, 2011, p.71-80).

FCDA perspective that ‘issues of gender, power, and ideology have become increasingly more complex and subtle’ in present times (Lazar, 2007, p.141). It can be argued that proverbs, by their nature, present more complex and subtle understandings. That is, by their opaque and sometimes ambiguous meanings, proverbs often hide their intended meanings, thereby making their ideological underpinnings subtle, but quite pervasive. Proverbs can therefore serve to sustain (hierarchically) gendered social arrangements, in which the woman is disadvantaged, and these may be presented in very subtle ways. The work of FCDA is to critique such unequal gender relations (Diabah and Amfo, 2015, p.8).

The central concern of FCDA, therefore, is ‘critiquing discourses which sustain a patriarchal social order: that is, relations of power that systematically privilege men as a social group and disadvantage, exclude and disempower women as a social group’ (Lazar, 2005, p.5). Accordingly, the overriding aim of FCDA (like CDA) is to develop an analytical resistance to these unequal gender practices. But, in the spirit of postmodern feminism – which argues for the diversity of gender practices and creates room for the reinterpretation and contestation of meaning and different subject positions in different contexts. It is in this light that writer find it a useful analytical approach for this study. The focus in this study will not only be on critiquing the representations that disadvantaged women, but will also highlight those that (appear to) work in their favour.

2.4. Hegemonic masculinity and femininity

In critiquing gender inequalities, which FCDA seeks to do, two concepts that are useful for consideration in patriarchal societies are hegemonic masculinity and femininity. Patriarchal societies are noted for promoting male rule and female subordination, i.e. the domination of men over women. Men are seen as authority figures who hold the power, and this is seen as legitimate or largely inherent (cf. Connell, 1987, 1995).

Deeply entrenched in patriarchal societies are notions of hegemonic masculinity and femininity. According to Connell (1995: p.77), hegemonic masculinity is the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women. Schippers (2007) also defines it as 'the qualities defined as manly that establish and legitimate a hierarchical and complementary relationship to femininity and that, by doing so, guarantee the dominant position of men and the subordination of women' (p.94). On the other hand, hegemonic femininity consists of the characteristics defined as womanly that establish and legitimate a hierarchical and complementary relationship to hegemonic masculinity and that, by doing so, guarantee the dominant position of men and the subordination of women (Schippers, 2007, p. 94)

Connell (1987) calls this 'emphasized femininity' and defines it as 'compliance with' and 'subordination [to men, which] ... is oriented to accommodating the interests and desires of men' (p. 184). Hegemonic femininity therefore complements hegemonic masculinity by guaranteeing the dominant position of men and the subordination of women, that is, an acceptance of, and compliance with, a traditional understanding that men are superior to women (Diabah and Amfo, 2015, p.9).

Diabah and Amfo (2015, p.9). stated that both hegemonic masculinity and femininity operate and establish themselves through consensus (e.g. persuading or 'luring' women to accept that certain types of femininities are positively valued) and not through force. Thus, women are subtly made to accept and even enjoy their subordinate roles in society.

2.5. The data

The discussions in this article are based on 7 proverbs that relate to women from written sources. The proverbs examined in the study were taken from a dictionary entitled *1330 Babasan dan Paribahasa Bahasa Sunda* (Munawar, 2010), which was published by Nuansa Aulia Publication in Bandung-Indonesia. Most of these proverbs explicitly mention awewe, the Sundanese word for female, which in many instances is aptly translated as 'woman/women'.

The proverbs were then put into several categories by the researchers based on the researchers' understanding of the proverbs, formed as a result of native speaker competences and prolonged contact with the language community. As for the objective of the study is to analyze traditional views on the perceptions and roles of the woman in Sundanese society and explore the interrelation between language, gender and culture with using a Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) approach.

3. RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The results showed in the Sundanese proverbs that women are portrayed as object of sex, representation of virtue and constructions of submissiveness. As shown in the following table:

Table 1- Data Description

Proverbs	Meaning	Representation
<i>Anak hiji keur gumeulis</i>	a woman who recently had one child looked more beautiful, especially if she is good at caring for the body.	Women as object of sex
<i>Anak tilu keur kumusut</i>	a woman who already had three children looked disheveled, especially if she is not good at taking care of her body or dress up.	Women as representation of virtue
<i>Ngeunah angeun ngeunah angan</i>	a wife should be loyal, her cooking tasty, not lack of food, and has no trouble.	Constructions of submissiveness
<i>Awewe mah dulang ti nande</i>	a woman usually depends on the desires of man	
<i>Awewe mah tara cari ka Batawi</i>	a woman did not have to go far trying to make a living, just need to serve her husband only	
<i>Babon kapurba ku jago</i>	a woman must obey her husband	
<i>Sapi anut ka banteng</i>	a woman should be devoted to her husband	

3.1. Research Findings

Women as object of sex

One feminine stereotype is the perception that women pay particular attention to their physical appearance (see Liu et al., 2012). This is in fulfilment of the expectation that women should be physically attractive (perhaps in fulfilment of their role as ‘sex objects’, i.e. being the focus of attention for men’s sexual desires. This stereotype is reproduced in the following proverbs:

(1) *Anak hiji keur gumeulis*

(a woman who recently had one child looked more beautiful, especially if she is good at caring for the body.)

(Munawar, 2010, p. 5)

(2) *Anak tilu keur kumusut*

(a woman who already had three children looked disheveled, especially if she is not good at taking care of her body or dress up)

(Munawar, 2010, p.5)

Representation of women as sex objects even this is found in a variety of proverbs in the world such as in Indonesian and Akan proverbs like “*bagai bulan empat belas*” which meaning women who primp in order that pretty (Mubarok, 2016, p.688) and “*If a woman goes to the bathroom and she doesn’t come back quickly, then she is dressing up*” (Diabah and Amfo, 2015, p.13).

Women as representation of virtue

The following proverbs stipulate what are considered, within the Sundanese socio-cultural context, as characteristics of virtue: hard work, the ability to cook delicious food and submissiveness.

(3) *Ngeunah angeun ngeunah angan*

(a wife should be loyal, her cooking tasty, not lack of food, and has no trouble)

(Munawar, 2010, p.106)

Through the use of a stereotypically feminine practice (should be loyal, cooking tasty, not lack of food, and has no trouble), the above examples indicate that several of the marks of a good wife/ideal woman. In other words, should be loyal, cooking tasty, not lack of food, and has no trouble are four demanding tasks. Yet women are expected to do these tasks, as shown in example above. A good woman is the one who cooks regularly and always has food in her kitchen. The woman’s ability to work hard (including multi-tasking) and keep her family together is what makes her an ideal woman. And it is also found in Akan proverbs (Ghana) such as “*If the hard-working/ideal woman puts her child on her back, she carries a load at the same time*” and “*It is a mother who knows what her children will eat*” (Diabah and Amfo, 2015, pp.11-12).

Constructions of submissiveness

Another socio-cultural expectation, that is, an ideal feminine characteristic in patriarchal societies, is the submissiveness of women. For most feminists, however, the submission of the woman also translates into her subordination, a concept which is at the heart of feminist research. In other words, when women submit to men, men end up taking advantage of them and dominating them (Diabah and Amfo, 2015, p.14). As shown in Sundanese proverbs, however, the submission of a woman is interpreted positively as a virtue, an expression of love or an indication of wisdom, as shown below:

(4) *Awewe mah dulang ti nande*

(a woman usually depends on the desires of man)

(Munawar, 2010, p.9)

(5) *Awewe mah tara cari ka Batawi*

(Woman did not has to go far trying to make a living, just need to serve the her husband only)

(Munawar, 2010, p.9)

(6) *Babon kapurba ku jago*

(a woman must obey her husband)

(Munawar, 2010, p.12)

(7) *Sapi anut ka banteng*

(a woman should be devoted to her husband)

(Munawar, 2010, p.134)

In example 7 (same with no 6, the comparison female baboon with male baboon), the woman is compared to the cows, and she is expected to submit/follow to the bull (the man). The cow is generally considered a weak and submissive animal. However, the specific attribute of the cow that is brought to the fore in the comparison is representation of submissiveness of female to male. This is in line with Diabah's (2011) argument that they can make an intended meaning more vivid by highlighting a particular aspect of reality while hiding others.

Another traditional stereotype is the representation of women as dependent on men for various kinds of provisions. These include financial or material support and finally require them to submit to their husband. As a result, they become dependent on men for their material needs like shown in proverbs (5) above. In other words, no matter what a woman does or achieves (including socioculturally unacceptable gender practices), she is still under the control of the man. A woman is therefore expected not to rise above the husband (financially, professionally, educationally, etc.) or take a leading role. Rather, she is to play a supporting role. The following proverbs tend to remind women of their 'appropriate' subordinate position in society. Therefore, ideal for the woman to show submission to the man (especially in marriage) by allowing him to 'lead', including making final decisions. Because men are traditionally expected to take the leading role in society especially in Sundanese area like shown in proverbs (4), (5), (6), and (7). One socio-cultural expectation for most cultures, especially patriarchal societies, is for people not to 'transgress' by crossing masculine and feminine boundaries. These proverbs therefore tend to denigrate the efforts of feminists in their fight for gender equality.

3.2. Discussion

In my interpretation (writer) of how the proverbs reinforce traditional gender stereotypes and something ideal not only for women but also for men, writer make reference to two notions which are at the heart of our analytical approach (FCDA): hegemonic masculinity (which legitimizes the traditional authority, power or control of men over women) and hegemonic femininity (which guarantees the dominant position of men and the subordination of women, i.e. an acceptance of, and compliance with, a traditional understanding that men are superior to women). Writer argues that these gendered proverbs tend to be hegemonic because the power and authority of men, as prescribed by society. And it is found in Sundanese proverbs.

By presenting most of the traditional gender stereotypes positively (e.g. as a virtue), it becomes difficult for women to challenge them. Therefore, in line with FCDA's claim that gendered discourses have hidden agendas (see Lazar, 2005; Litosseliti, 2006), writer argues that most of these proverbs tend to serve the interests of men by safeguarding hegemonic masculinity. In addition, hegemonic femininity which guarantees the dominant position of men and the subordination of women, i.e. an acceptance of, and compliance with, a traditional understanding that men are superior to women as illustrated in Sundanese proverbs in the research findings.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the results of research on women's representation in the Sundanese proverbs, it can be deduced that writer argues that most of these proverbs tend to serve the interests of men by safeguarding hegemonic masculinity. In addition, hegemonic femininity which guarantees the dominant position of men and the subordination of women, i.e. an acceptance of, and compliance with, a traditional understanding that men are superior to women as illustrated in Sundanese proverbs in the research findings. In addition, in these proverbs women are described as dependent on and submissive to men, and who are valued for their physical charm, domestic roles (cooking tasty), must obey and ability to serve her husband. Furthermore, writer argues that these gendered proverbs tend to be hegemonic because the power and authority of men, as prescribed by society.

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