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Cultural Reflections: A Comparative Analysis of Women's Representation in English and Telugu Proverbs

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ABSTRACT

Paremiology remained on the outskirts of global scholarly scrutiny. The significance of ancient human universals in shaping commonalities across diverse world cultures has been largely overlooked. This research paper explores the representation of women in English and Telugu proverbs, undertaking a comparative analysis to discern cultural reflections within these linguistic expressions. By examining a diverse selection of proverbs from both languages, the study aims to unveil nuanced portrayals associated with women. The values attributed to women, the way women were treated, the rights that were granted to them, the nature of relationship that women established in their family life and how different roles of women like daughters, mothers and wives that were portrayed in the proverbs of English and Telugu languages presented in the study help one understand the underlying unity in the basic aspects of life between two different cultures the Telugu and the English, miles and miles apart geographically. The findings foster cross-cultural awareness and enrich the discourse on language, culture, and gender studies, providing valuable insights into the intricate relationship between language and societal attitudes.

Key Words: *English proverbs, Telugu proverbs, Cultural reflections, Comparative analysis, Societal attitudes.*

INTRODUCTION

Globalisation has thrown humanity in such a plight that people have to learn how to communicate inclusively instead of exclusively. Mutual knowledge acts as an important key for coexistence of humanity at all levels. 'What others think' has also gained equal importance with 'what we think'. It is almost ignored that besides globalisation, old human universals have been responsible for the similarities that exist among different cultures of the world.

In the intricate tapestry of linguistic expressions, proverbs stand as cultural artefacts reflecting the collective wisdom and values of societies. This research endeavours to unravel the nuanced portrayal of women encapsulated in the proverbial fabric, embarking on a comparative analysis between English and Telugu linguistic traditions. Proverbs, as succinct encapsulations of cultural norms, harbour the potential to reveal deeply ingrained societal perceptions. The exploration of these linguistic snapshots aims to shed light on the convergence, divergence, and cultural intricacies surrounding the depiction of womenfolk in English and Telugu proverbs. By delving into the proverbial wisdom of these two distinct linguistic landscapes, this study seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on language, culture, and gender, unravelling the layers of meaning that shape our understanding of societal attitudes towards women across different linguistic and cultural contexts.

Paremiology received scant attention from the critics around the world. Mieder dwells on the fact that "the wisdom expressed in proverbs is actually quite similar from culture to culture. That is why so many proverbs have found a wide distribution beyond national borders and why there are so many equivalent proverbs that might have different images and structures, but that mean the same thing!" (Mieder 34). The present study is undertaken not only to verify the relevance of this belief of Mieder but to bridge the gap between the proverbs of English and that of Telugu with reference to the representation of women. Further, a comparative study of the English and the Telugu proverbs received little or no attention among the researchers in the recent past. Therefore, the present study might add to the research that will be made in future to give more interpretation to the proverbs in general and to the proverbs related to women in particular in both the languages.

Literature Review

Fatma Shijaku sought to examine proverbs related to women in both English and Albanian languages. Using English and Albanian dictionaries, her objective was to illustrate the multifaceted nature of women and the various roles they assume in society.

Umesh K. Rathod & Balaji A. Navle in their paper entitled, “Images Of Women In English Proverbs” examined how women are perceived, symbolised and portrayed through English proverbs besides examining whether there has been any stereotypical image of the woman in English proverbs.

Uzma Rani and Mazhar Iqbal Ranjha delved into the diverse identities assigned to men and women within English proverbs. Their research not only addresses the portrayal of the female gender but also encompasses the representation of males, examining the relationships depicted between both genders in these proverbial expressions.

Abbas Lutfi Hussein and Ibrahim Adil Qadir examined ten English proverbs to uncover the perspectives on men and women within English-speaking countries. What set their study apart from much of the existing research on proverbs was the application of an analytical tool, Equating and Contrasting, derived from critical stylistics. This approach allowed them to reveal and analyze sexist ideologies embedded in English proverbs.

Stella Nyanjugu Gichohi and Agus Subiyanto conducted a research analysis on specific Kikuyu proverbs concerning women and their corresponding English counterparts. The primary objective was to determine if there exists a parallel semantic structure between the Kikuyu proverbs and their English equivalents. Additionally, the study involved a comparative examination of the cultural themes inherent in both languages.

Kalloji Susheel Kumar explored proverbs and culturally linked lexical equivalents in Telugu and Kannada. The paper conducts an analysis to investigate the reasons behind seven identified lexical forms in Telugu and Kannada proverbs having equivalent lexical forms but differing in grammatical markers attached to these forms in both languages.

Research Methodology

For the purpose of the study, we collected English and Telugu proverbs related to women from original sources, such as the Oxford dictionary and proverb books. English proverbs were taken from the *Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs*, fifth edition (2007). Telugu proverbs were collected from *Andhra Lokokti Chandrika*, a collection of Telugu proverbs by captain M.W. Carr (1868) and *Sampurna Telugu Samethalu*, collected and edited by Maithili Venkateswara Rao first edition (2011). Contrastive and descriptive methodology has been used to analyse the data collected. Proverbs were compared depending entirely on their content. For a better understanding of the Telugu proverbs by the English speakers, the pronunciation of the proverb is given in *Italics* just below the proverb and its meaning is given in the parentheses just below its pronunciation.

Women in English and Telugu Proverbs

There are proverbs in English and Telugu Language that present the values attributed to women, the way women were treated, the rights that were granted to them, The relational patterns that women develop in the context of their family life and an array of responsibilities managed by women. In a word, almost all the aspects regarding womanhood can be found in the proverbs of both the languages.

The present study undertakes only a few of the aspects i.e. Female elegance,

Female elegance

Appearance of a person plays an important role in social life. Attractive people are better liked and it is believed that they possess more sociability and intellectual competence (Schipper 68). In spite of cultural variations across the world, it is universally acknowledged that 'a thing of beauty is a joy forever'. While the ideal condition of the presence of beauty and brains in one and the same person is almost impossible, people often associate women with appearance and men with brains. Many bards, in different languages, sang of the enticing power of female beauty. However, some people set outward appearance against inner qualities and put forward that physical beauty should not be confused with inner positive qualities and that the grave dangers that beauty provokes should not be ignored. In English and Telugu proverbs, the inner beauty is given more importance than the outer appearance.

“Beauty is null and void, when honour is lost” (English)

శీలములేనిసొందర్యంతావిలేనిపువ్వువంటిది. (Telugu)

Śīlamulēnisaundaryāntāvilēnipuvvuvaṅṅidi.

(Beauty without honour is like a flower without a bud).

While discussing beauty, proverbs, both English and Telugu, deal with its opposite, that is ugliness. What is beautiful is presented as problematic, dangerous and even deadly especially in the case of wives.

The ugliest girl makes the best housewife. (English)

ఇల్లుఇక్కటంఅలిమర్కటం. (Telugu)

Illuirakaṣamālimarkaṣam.

(The residence is compact, and the spouse resembles a monkey).

Male offspring versus female offspring

Children are regarded as the greatest treasure in the world. They render great help and support to their parents. However, the birth of a female child is greeted with less enthusiasm than the male one. In spite of the fact that both man and woman are equally necessary for the welfare and prosperity of humanity, most of the societies traditionally bent towards the male child (Schipper 87). This is due to the traditional organisation of most of the societies where the moving of the daughter after marriage is necessary. Further, in many cultures, the parents have to offer dowry to the bridegroom to get their daughter married. In order to raise the dowry, all the members of the family have to make sacrifices. Due to all these aspects, daughters have been considered a costly business and a family, especially, a poor one with the daughters is presented as tragic and worrisome. In both English and Telugu, there are proverbs which attest to this preference of sons to daughters and the troublesome event of getting a decent marriage to a daughter.

While the English proverb, “One girl is a girl, two girls are half a girl and three girls are no girl at all”, gives concession in the birth of a female child, the Telugu proverbs,

అబద్ధాలుచెబితే, ఆడపిల్లలుపుడతారు.

Abad'dhāluchebitē, āḍapillalupuḍatāru.

(Those who propagate falsehoods will have female offspring).

అమ్మాయిపుట్టిందిఅంటేఆయువుసగంకుంగిందిఅన్నమాట.

Am'māyipuṭṭindiantēāyuvusagamkuṅgindiannamātē.

(If a girl is born, it means that life is shortened by half).

Consider the birth of a female child not only as a punishment for bad behaviour that is telling lies but as a threat to the life of the parents.

The difficult task of securing a decent marriage for the daughters in which the exchange of money involves in the form of either bride wealth in which case the girl is paid for or dowry in case of which the girl is paid off found expression in the following English and Telugu proverbs.

“Marry your son when you will, your daughter when you can” (English).

ఆడపిల్లపెళ్లిఅంతదొరకనిబావిఅంటుచూసేవే. (Telugu)

Āḍapillapeḷliantāndorakanibāviantuchūsēvē.

(A girl's marriage is like a never-ending well).

Eminence of motherhood

Mothers are glorified as the most valuable representatives not only of women kind but of the entire humanity. Choruses sing of her divinity and eternal source of endless love. While the English proverb, “God could not be everywhere, therefore he decided to make mothers”, proclaims mother as an embodiment of godliness, the Telugu proverbs -

తల్లినినమ్మినవాడు, ధరాణినినమ్మినవాడుచెడడు.

Tallini nam'minavāḍu, dharaṇinīnam'minavāḍucheḍaḍu.

(He who believes in mother and the earth will never be spoiled).

తల్లిదైవము, తండ్రిధనము

Talli daivamu, taṅḍridhanamu.

(Mother is divine, father is a treasure).

- observe not only the impeccable selflessness of mothers but her divinity as well.

The daughter is reminiscent of her mother

While the strong bond between a mother and a son has been regarded as incompatible to the roles man has to play in the society, many proverbs both English and Telugu render the message that mother and daughter should invariably resemble each other.

As is the mother, so is her daughter (English).

A light-heeled mother makes a heavy-heeled daughter (English).

తల్లిగుణంకూతురేబయటపెడుతుంది. (Telugu)

Talli guṇamkūturēbayatapēḍutundi.

(The mother's quality is brought out by the daughter herself).

తల్లినిచూచిపిల్లను, పాడినిచూచిబల్లెనుతీసుకొనవలెను. (Telugu)

Tallini chūcipillanupāḍinichūcibarrenutīsukonavalenu.

(Observe the mother before choosing the daughter; assess the buffalo's milk production before making a purchase).

Marital Bond and Life Partner

Society earnestly desires for girls to marry and assume the role of wives. The patriarchal society presented women not only as the decisive factor in marriage but laid almost the entire burden of maintaining a healthy married life. It seems that many proverbs, both English and Telugu, tend to protect the husband's reputation without recognising the hardships, toil and sacrifice of a woman as a life partner. Though both the partners are equally responsible for leading a happy married life, women are presented as more responsible for a happy or unhappy married life. Right from the beginning, the woman tends to bear the brunt of blame. For instance,

“After a dream of wedding comes a corpse” (English).

అమ్మగృహప్రవేశము, అయ్యస్యశానప్రవేశం. (Telugu)

Am'magṛhapravēśamu, ayyasmaśānapravēśam.

(The bride steps into her husband's residence, and the groom enters his final resting place).

“He that has a good wife has an angel at his side; he that has a bad wife has a devil at his elbow” (English).

భార్యఅనుకూలవతిఅయితేసుఖిఅగునులేకుంటేవేదాంతిఅగును. (Telugu)

Bhāryaanukūlavatiayitēsukhiagunulēkuṇṭēvēdāntiagunu.

(If the wife is good, the husband will be happy, if not, he will be a theologian).

The same prejudiced attitude is seen in the treatment that the wedlock partners show towards each other. While the wife is seen as an obedient follower of her husband, as if her name is 'yes', the male partner is given suggestions to keep his wife submissive, as if a wife has to be ruled.

“Inferiours imitate the manners of superiours.. wives of their husbands” (English).

భర్తవర్తనంటే, సతికిగ్రాహ్యంబు. (Telugu)

Bhartavartanambē, satikigrāhyambu.

(A wife should understand her husband's behaviour).

Ultimately, this line of thinking that the wrongs committed by a man are considered less significant than the virtuous deeds of a woman presents men, both in English and Telugu proverbs, assuming the guise of the uninvolved and defenceless victims of marriage.

“Young man married is, a young man marred” (English).

అయ్యందిరాపెండ్లిఅంటే, అణిగిందిరారందిఅన్నాడట. (Telugu)

Ayyindirāpeṇḍliāṅṭē, aṅigindirārandiannāḍaṭa.

(After marriage, suppressed his infatuation).

In-fecundity

The utmost importance given to posterity, all over the world, has idealised the amazing phenomenon of becoming pregnant and bringing a child into the world. In spite of knowing that giving birth to a child is fatal and involves immense pain and serious problems, women undertake this herculean task as a boon. Sterility i.e. childlessness has been considered one of the worst problems that a couple faces after their marriage. Though both partners are equally responsible for lack of children, it is mainly the woman who is stigmatised by the society. Not only a childless woman is placed at the very bottom of the female hierarchy but she has to guard herself against insults as I dictated below.

“A woman without children doesn't know what love is” (English).

గోడ్రాలికిపిమితెలుసునుబిడ్డనొప్పులు. (Telugu)

Goḍrālikiṭēmitelusunubiddanoppulu.

(What understanding does a woman who cannot conceive have about the agony of giving birth?)

Turbulence in the interaction of in-law mothers and daughters-in-law

There are references, in both English and Telugu proverbs, to the furious situations that erupt between a mother-in-law and a daughter-in-law, especially when they are faced to live together. Perhaps, the persistent prejudice that animosity is not uncommon in the relationships of many mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law not only prevents them from being kind to each other but makes them quarrel at the slightest provocation. The scenario is depicted through the viewpoint of either a mother-in-law or a daughter-in-law.

The English proverb, “there is but one good mother-in-law and she is dead” and the Telugu proverb, “కత్తిమెత్తన అత్తమంచిలేదు”. *Katti mettana atta mañcilēdu*. (A sword lacks gentleness, and a mother-in-law lacks kindness) - indicate the impossibility of kindness in a mother-in-law.

There are proverbs which represent the mother-in-law as a person having a bad or rather selective memory. The following proverbs of English and Telugu present her as a person who has almost forgotten her own experience as a daughter-in-law.

“The mother-in-law remembers not that she was a daughter-in-law” (English).

అల్తా ఒకరింటికోడల్. (Telugu)

Attāokintikōdalē

(The mother-in-law was, at one point, a daughter-in-law herself).

The mutually negative feelings and reactions of the mother-in-law who dislikes her daughter-in-law as an intruder in her house and the daughter-in-law who hates to live with her mother-in-law can best be understood in the following proverbs.

“Mother-in-law and daughter-in-law are a tempest and hailstorm” (English).

అత్తలేనికోడలు ఉత్తమురాలు, కోడలులేని అత్తగుణవంతురాలు. (Telugu)

Atta lēnikōḍaluuttamurālu, kōḍalulēni atta guṇavanturālu.

(A daughter-in-law without an aunt is the best, and an aunt without a daughter-in-law is a virtuous one).

Counsel from women

The advice provided by women has been consistently undermined to support dubious notions about their knowledge and intelligence. The alleged lack of awareness not only portrays them as ineffective judges but also taints the results with negativity. There are proverbs, both in English and Telugu, that show this fear of disastrous nature of women's counsel.

“Women’s counsel is cold” (English).

అడదాని మాట అపదలకు మూలం. (Telugu)

Āḍadānimāṭāpadalakumūlam.

(A woman's word is a source of danger).

Female stature

The most common fact about physical stature of male and female bodies - on average, female bodies are comparatively smaller than male bodies - has effectively been used by men for their own gain and benefit. Most women are not physically as strong as men. This physical stature of women, which is quite natural, has been literally looked down upon. Both English and Telugu proverbs express this disdainful attitude towards women.

“A woman is the weaker vessel” (English).

ముప్పయేండ్ల అడదీ, మూడేండ్ల మగవాడు వకటి.

Mupphaiyēṅḍlāḍadī, mūdēṅḍlamagavāḍuvakaṭi

(A woman at the age of thirty and a man aged three are considered as one. [in strength]).

Female eloquence

Proverbs belonging to a variety of cultures warn against the dangers of women's verbal talent which has been developed as a defensive tactic in response to violence of men who are physically stronger. This gifted aptitude of women has mainly been referred to contemptuously in both English and Telugu proverbs.

“A woman’s strength is in her tongue” (English).

అడదాన్ని నోరు పెట్టుకోని బ్రతకమన్నారు. (Telugu).

Āḍadānninōrupettukonibratakamannāru.

(A woman is asked to live by her verbal force).

Occupation of Women

Most societies have nurtured the notions of differentiation between what has to be regarded men's work and what women's work. These gender based task assignments have been justified by various reasons - physical strength, mens

assumed greater skill, women's child bearing and nursing. Woman's indispensable role in safeguarding the posterity of humanity gave rise to the arguments that it is dangerous to expose a woman's womb to hunting, war and travels and she should be given the tasks which can be performed near home i.e. prone to disruptions and coupled with nursing and childcare (Schipper 213). Not only English and Telugu, but proverbs throughout the world simply state that women should perform only the imposed, created and instituted work and should not come in the way of men's domain.

“A father to his desk, a mother to her dishes” (English).

కూడువండనిఅడది, మంచంఅల్లనిమగవాడుఉండరు. (Telugu)

Kūduvaṇḍaniāḍadi, maṅcamallanimagavāḍuṇḍaru.

(There is no woman without the ability to cook, and there is no man without the capability to knit a cot).

Malignant Power

Once an idea is associated with a demonic entity, it has become a taboo that it should be suppressed. In proverbs, this idea of evil has been projected onto women as the perceived malevolent dimension of man. There are proverbs in English and Telugu which vehemently blame women for developing forbidden feelings in man who, in spite of their inexorable religious commandments, failed to suppress evil thoughts and dreams and therefore choose to turn women as the source of his forbidden thoughts.

“Women are the root of all evil” (English).

అడవానిబుద్ధి, అపరబుద్ధి. (Telugu)

Āḍadānibud'dhiaparabud'dhi

(A woman's intellect is an evil intellect).

Knowledge

In spite of knowing well the great advantages of acquiring knowledge, women's longing for knowledge has been looked down upon by almost all societies across the globe. The thrust for knowledge among women has deliberately been suppressed from the very beginning. Both Telugu and English proverbs warn men against the disastrous effects of intelligent and knowledgeable women.

“A mule that whinnies and a woman that speaks Latin never come to any good” (English).

చదువనేర్చినఅడువారితోను, వండనేర్చినమగవారితోనుఓపలేము. (Telugu)

Chaduvanērchināḍuvārītōnu, vaṇḍanērchinamagavārītōnuōpalēmu.

(We cannot tolerate educated women and men who can cook).

Nature

As Schipper contends, to mitigate the increasing rivalry in economic and other pursuits between men and women and to continue the dominance of male supremacy, women's innate capacities are associated with negative power and they are portrayed as a threat to society not only in early Europe but in other parts of the globe as well. As such, there are messages in the proverbs that warn men against various domains including the very nature of women. Both English and Telugu proverbs echo this discriminative tendency.

Laughing

“Maidens should laugh softly that men hear them not” (English).

నవ్వేఅడదాన్ని, ఏడ్చేమగవాడినినమ్మరాదు. (Telugu)

Navvēāḍadānni, ēḍchēmagavāḍinam'marādu

(One should be cautious of a woman who laughs and a man who cries, as they may not be trustworthy).

Governance

“Women in state affairs are like monkeys in glass-shops” (English).

అడపెత్తనం, తంబళిదొరతనం. (Telugu)

Āḍapettanam, tambaḷidoratanam.

(A woman's administration and a thambali's knighthood).

(A thambali is a Saiva priest of humble origin, adorned with the sacred thread, striving to adhere to Brahminical customs).

Jealousy

“A jealous woman is worse than a witch” (English).

అసూయముండు, అడదివెనుక (Telugu).

Asīyamundu, āḍadivenuka.

(Jealousy is in front, woman behind).

Unconcealedness

A woman conceals what she knows not. (English)

ఆడదానినోటిలోనుప్పుగింజనానదు (Telugu).

Āḍadāninōṭilōnupuvugiṅjanānadu.

(Sesame seeds cannot soak in a woman's mouth).

Ambiguous Statements

“If a woman does not want to dance, she says her skirt is too short” (English).

ఆడనేరకమద్దెలమీదతప్పుచెప్పినట్లు (Telugu).

Āḍanērakamaddelamīdatappuceppinaṭṭu.

(Lacking the skill to dance, she found fault with the drum).

“A woman's nay is a double yea, they say” (English).

ఆడదానిమాటలకుఅర్థాలవేరు. (Telugu)

Āḍudānimāṭalakuardhālēvēru.

(The words of a woman have different meanings).

CONCLUSION

The present study has been carried out to investigate proverbs about women in the English and Telugu languages with an aim of depicting women in their various roles within society by examining the similarities and distinctions in content between English and Telugu proverbs. The present study found similarities between the proverbs of English and Telugu languages in giving more importance to honour than beauty, considering beauty problematic, preferring sons to daughters, considering daughters marriage as a difficult task, recognising the godliness of mother, identifying resemblance between daughter and mother, blaming wife for all the misfortunes of married life, stigmatising women alone for childlessness, nurturing prejudice that all mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law hate each other, presenting women's council as a disasters one, taking advantage of the physical stature of women, referring to contemptuously the verbal talent of women, forcing women to perform instituted work, blaming women as the source of evil thoughts, considering women's knowledge as disastrous one, showing discriminative tendency towards various domains of women like laughing, administration, ambiguous statements etc.,

The differences between the proverbs of Telugu and English languages with reference to the aspects taken for study are negligible. The differences are also in terms of quantity rather than ideology. For instance, there are more proverbs in English than in Telugu on beauty and the adverse effects of beauty, expressing great relief and happiness over the death of a wife, expressing disastrous effects of women's council and considering the power of women as evil. Similarly, there are more proverbs in Telugu than in English that express the persistent prejudice between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law. Regarding the birth of a female child, the English proverb allows concession which is not there in the Telugu proverb.

The similarities in the ideas expressed in the content of the proverbs of English and Telugu languages are mainly due to the similarity in the stubborn patriarchal ideology of our ancestors that upheld the indispensable supremacy of men in both the English and Telugu cultures. However, it is inappropriate to blame or to criticise the stubborn patriarchal ideology of our ancestors. For, times have changed altogether and to evaluate their ideology would be like "trying a man by the laws of one country who acted under those of another". It is significant to perceive the similarity that existed between the ideologies regarding certain basic aspects of life of two different cultures i.e. English and Telugu, miles apart from each other on the globe.

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