

(NEGATIVE) PERCEPTION OF WOMEN IN PROVERBS ACROSS CULTURES OF THE CHANGING WORLD¹

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Abstract: Any research on proverbs related to women entails a thorough study of the subject of both folklore, tradition, human stereotypes and the overall perception of past and current gender issues. Only then are we able to comprehend and explain the messages that certain categories of women proverbs convey. One of the classifications that is frequently offered by the proverb scholars is that according to either general female characteristics or specific roles and situations. What admittedly appears the perception of women in proverbs across many cultures of the world seems to be in most cases of negative value. Nevertheless, the world today no longer reflects past women stereotypes and proverbs, as Kerschen highlights (1998: 124), “[...] may be regarded as detrimental to the progress of women’s fulfillment”.

Key words: women-related proverbs, folklore, negative perception of women, universality of women proverbs, women categories of proverbs

Introduction

The aim set to this paper is to outline selected categories of women proverbs and highlight proverbs’ universal meaning existing in the globalised world we live in. With the attempt of carrying out cursory analysis the subject of folklore – and its historical relationship with women proverbs – is given a short description and the impact of traditional customs, stereotypes and gender roles/status is given consideration as well. Yet, the main idea that is guided to this article is describing, through facts and examples, the negatively-coloured perception of female species in proverbs of various languages and cultures. Finally, a slow transition towards positive representation of women is the closing issue that opens the changing world for better future.²

¹ The author would like to express gratitude to Professor G.A. Kleparski for providing me with invaluable collection of dictionaries and other reference books.

² Publications that have been used as greatest aids and main reference sources of women proverbs in this article are, among others, Schipper’s *Never Marry a Woman with Big Feet: Women in Proverbs from Around the World* (2006) and Kerschen’s *American Proverbs about Women* (1998). Other main reference books that have been consulted constitute such paremiological and paremiographical dictionaries as Stone’s *The Routledge Book of World Proverbs* (2006), Manser’s *The*

1. Relationship between women proverbs and folklore

To start with, any research on woman-specific proverbs requires a thorough examination of the subject of folklore which is reflected worldwide in the form of customs, beliefs and practices of a certain community.³ Folklore is often perceived as ‘the voice of the folk’ (see Kerschen, 1998: 12), functions as oral tradition preserved in innumerable folklore genres and constitutes the rich source for formal records of culture. Through the centuries the content of such unique genres as, among others, proverbs, aphorisms and anecdotes has – to a large extent – reflected and perpetuated attitudes and beliefs about women, which in most cases appear to be negatively-tinted.⁴

The mutual correlation between women and folklore points to the commonly held notion that women are the repositories and embodiment of tradition. In many countries of the world, such as, for instance, South Asian nations, women are usually held responsible for family-related religious customs, rites of passage – especially birth and marriage – and other rituals connected with celebrations, maintaining family relationships and social linkages. “They are not only considered the hub for ensuring that tradition and rituals are followed but also are designated with the role of passing them on to the next generation”.⁵ Note that in South Asian communities women keep the tradition alive by, for instance, continuing to wear traditional clothes. Men in all the South Asian countries often tend to switch their clothing and mannerism to western styles, but social pressure does not allow women to do the same. Such unequal expectations in terms of garments may be easily observed in Pakistan where a man wearing blue jeans is considered ‘cool’, educated and urban based but a woman in blue jeans is usually considered western/modern, too out going, and in some way immoral.

Facts on File Dictionary of Proverbs (2002) and *Arnott's Peculiar Proverbs: Weird Words of Wisdom from Around the World* (2007).

³ The book that approaches proverbs from the angle of their treatment of women in folklore is Thiselton-Dyer's *Folklore of Women* (1906). The author outlines many different traditions from around the world to portray women as simultaneously the ‘weaker sex’ and the source of all evil.

⁴ American proverbial expressions where *woman* constitutes a central element are provided by, among others, Mieder, Kingsbury and Harder's *Dictionary of American Proverbs* (1992). In turn, Polish proverbs, aphorisms and anecdotes about women can be found in, among others, Maślowsky's *Wielka księga myśli świata* (2007: 305-322) and Maślowsky's *Wielka księga przysłów polskich* (2008).

⁵ See http://www.fouziasaeed.com/work/a_paper_on_women_in_folklore.php

There are certainly cultures in which one may notice elements of folklore that are both beneficial and helpful to women in terms of finding their strength and positive contribution to their well being.⁶ However upon closer inquiry on women's position in folklore it becomes a reality that folklore has mostly a damaging and restrictive effect on this sex because, in fact, it hampers women's emancipation, becomes a tool of oppression itself and an impediment to their rights as a human being. Suffice it to mention the stigma on a divorced woman which exists in many countries.⁷ In developed areas customs have changed but in rural places it is still not easy for a divorced woman to remarry. This is common tradition in countries such as India, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Worse still, in Pakistan and North India a divorcee woman is excluded from different folk rituals that are practiced with the bride and the groom during the wedding reception. Such a negative perception may be further supported with the following quotation extracted from Schipper (2006: 190):

In Jewish culture, the Talmud warns men not to marry a divorced woman, because 'All fingers are different', a statement in which finger stands for penis. Knowing different fingers enables women to compare: a frightening idea. 'Do not cook in your neighbour's saucepan' is a warning possibly motivated in part by the same fear as the warning against marrying a widow or a divorced woman, as they have had 'the' experience.

Another phrase which illustrates the negative impact of folk tradition on women is the one taken from Nepal where it is common to say *Swasni manchi alkako sumpati* 'A woman belongs to another household'. Note that the phrase implies not only the lack of identity in women and support of patriarchy but also describes a woman only in a relationship.

Following that line of thinking, we are led to accepting the conclusion that the category of folklore – and its historical relationship to women – may be regarded as a significant indicator

⁶ In Pakistan, for example, mostly in the area of Punjab water wells play a vital traditional role in the life of women. Going and being there together has become a routine activity for women, some kind of "a genuine excuse for going out of the house and an opportunity to see and share stories with their friends. There are many songs and folktales that have developed around the water wells. In Nepal also water wells provide a place for women to share their happiness and sorrows" (http://www.fouzasaeed.com/work/a_paper_on_women_in_folklore.php).

⁷ More information and examples of how South Asian folklore and traditional customs in the past and the present have a negative impact on women's life are provided in an article entitled 'SOUTH ASIAN FOLKLORE: A COMMON LEGACY: Exploring the Roots. Retrieving the Traditions' (http://www.fouzasaeed.com/work/a_paper_on_women_in_folklore.php).

of, among others, human stereotypes, sex relations and the overall perception of current gender issues. In other words, the legacy of folklore provides subsequent generations with such crucial issues as, for instance, those concerning sex and gender and – more precisely – significantly contributes to moulding people’s roles and identities.⁸ In effect, proverbs – the world’s smallest literary and folklore genre – “are a most telling part of that serial narrative about humankind” (Schipper, 2006: 15).

2. Perception of women in proverbs

Until recently, due to the male-dominated world, folklore scholarship pertaining to women had been kept to a minimum and thus largely excluded women from the picture of civilization’s progress. As indicated by Kerschen (1998: 2), “women’s folk specialties, such as needlework and weaving, were left almost unrecorded till recent times” mainly because of a lack of female storytellers. Since they had not had their own say, the view of women portrayed in proverbs was distorted by male prejudice and pervasive bias, and the positive aspects of womanhood were ignored. Such a status quo has largely contributed to the overall negative picture of a woman, in particular all the stereotypical attributes related to the female kind (see Kochman-Haładaj and Kleparski 2011).

Analysing the women-related proverbs from a historical perspective one can find that such proverbs tend to fall into certain patterns and are most frequently characterized by biting wit and bitter complaints. While some proverbs do praise and elevate women – notably mothers – in all societies existing in the world (e.g. *Behind every successful man is a woman; Without women, men were but ill-licked cubs* (Romanian); *God couldn’t be everywhere; therefore, He made mothers*)⁹ the majority are full of overt sexism, satire and bitterness (see

⁸ The fact that folklore strengthens designated social roles may be exemplified by an Ashanti proverb *When a tall woman carries palm nuts, birds eat them off her head*. The proverb implies that a tall woman who proudly carries nuts in a bowl on her head is presented as one who is showing off, and she is warned that she will be punished for it. The hidden meaning is that ‘male’ behaviour is condemned in a woman. The proverb is a warning to “girls who display what society considers to be male traits, and the palm nuts are a metaphor for ‘the male world’: as long as men are alive and around, a woman is not supposed to crack nuts. The proverb reminds women to refrain from getting involved in designated male roles” (Schipper, 2006: 31).

⁹ Examples of Polish proverbs where woman and mother are portrayed positively are: *Czego kobieta chce, tego Pan Bóg chce* ‘What is wanted by a woman, is wanted by God’, *Mąż doradza, a przy żonie władza* ‘Husband advises but wife rules’,

Kochman-Haładaj 2012). These proverbs that may be labelled as derogatory depict a woman as, among others, a long-winded (e.g. *The strength of a woman is in her tongue*), empty-headed (e.g. *Women's wisdom arrives after the event*) toy-like creature who is faithless to the man (e.g. *A faithless wife is shipwreck to a house (Roman)*¹⁰) by whom she should be ruled and to whom she belongs like property (e.g. *Handle with care women and glass; Women are like shoes, they can always be replaced (Rajasthani)*)¹¹ or livestock (e.g. *Never pick women or horses by candlelight*).

Studying female-related proverbs seems to provide a promising path to inquire how women have been perceived through the ages – mostly embodying negative values, as it seems – but also proves the slowly progressing change for better in stereotyping females. “With the rise of feminism, the search is on to find women’s contributions in history and thereby give them their appropriate place” (Kerschen, 1998: 2). This change may particularly be observed in industrialised societies and in socially privileged groups. A proverb which may be held to demonstrate a slightly positive transition in the perception of women is *A career girl would rather bring home the bacon than fry it*. The proverb, on one hand, testifies to the changing position of women in the field of work and home but – on the other hand – it is laden with sexist bias because the use of ‘girl’ instead of ‘woman’ denotes the patronizing attitude towards women, giving them no respect and recognition as adults. What the proverb implies is that bringing the food home is a rejection of the expected role of housewife.

Moreover, “proverbial observations about the most preoccupying elements of life”, shared by all societies of the world, “form an excellent starting point for a better mutual understanding without suspicion, hostility or polarization. Concretely exploring our cultural legacies together – in a brotherly and sisterly fashion – is an excellent way to build bridges between cultures” (Schipper, 2006: 14).

Serce jednej kobiety widzi więcej niż oczy dziesięciu mężczyzn ‘Heart of one woman can see more than eyes of ten men’, *Nie ma słodsze go jabłka niżli własna matka* ‘There is no sweetest apple than one’s own mother’.

¹⁰ Note that in some cases the nationality of the proverb’s origin is provided in the round brackets, if that is known.

¹¹ The Polish proverb which talks about women as property is *Dom stary i żona stara częściej potrzebują naprawy* ‘Old house and wife need constant repair’.

3. Universality of women proverbs and gender roles/status across cultures

What is amazing about women proverbs is the fact that majority of them may be easily understood cross-culturally, even though they originate from all sorts of 'foreign' cultures and are characterised by huge cultural differences.¹² This may only be possible due to human common characteristics, fundamental needs and experiences worldwide. An adequate American proverb which illustrates that human condition distilled in the world's proverbs proves to be more alike than different is *Human nature is the same all over the world* (see Mieder, 2004: xv). More specifically, proverbs "reflect not only cultural uniqueness but also commonalities shared around the globe and throughout history, thanks to our all being equipped with either a male or a female body" (Schipper, 2006: 20). Likewise, the social roles attributed to women and men¹³ or the relations between the sexes have been reduced to one standard and globalised. Sociolinguists would attribute this tendency to normalised patterns still existing in the attribution of status and the division of labor in many countries. The quotation below, taken from Levinson and Malone (1980: 267) testifies to the unequal though universally common treatment of both sexes:

In virtually all societies men fare better than women. Men exercise more power, have more status and enjoy more freedom. Men usually head the family, exercise considerably more force in legal, political, and religious matters, take alternative sexual partners, may often take more than one wife, have greater freedom in the choice of a spouse, usually reside near their own kin, and have easier access to alcoholic beverages and drugs. Women, on the other hand, are often segregated or avoided during menstruation, must often share their husbands with one or more co-wives, are blamed for childlessness, and are often forced to defer to men in public places. Child rearing is the only domain where women regularly exert more influence than men.

¹² Such a conclusion was drawn by, among others, Mineke Schipper who in her book entitled *Unheard Words: Women and Literature in Africa, the Arab World, Asia, the Caribbean and Latin America* (1985) found fascinating resemblances in proverbs originating from countries around the world and throughout history. The author based her study on the collection of 15,000 oral and written sources, originating from more than 240 languages and all continents.

¹³ As Schipper (2006: 18) points out: "[...] proverbs about women throw a fascinating light upon the worldwide existing gender division of roles in life. [...] Women and men who do not fit the prescribed behaviour are stigmatized – no less by other women than by men. [...] As the French writer Madame de Sévigné observed in the seventeenth century: 'The humbling of inferiors is necessary to the maintenance of social order.' Or in the words of a German proverb: 'One makes the bed and the other lies down in it'".

In turn, typical American folklore characteristics regarding male-female images are provided by Kerschen (1998: 2) who paraphrases the material of another folklore author Alan Dandes (1980) from his chapter titled 'The Crowing Hen and the Easter Bunny: Male Chauvinism in American Folklore'. The following generalised American attributes ascribed to both sexes and gender division of roles are not only predominant in western cultures but also exist in many other patriarchal communities¹⁴:

Boys are discussed first and discussed in terms of strength and largeness.

Girls are associated with sweet foodstuff, smallness, and a plaything nature.

Domestic servitude, as in homemaking and housekeeping, is defined for women.

Women are passive.

Women are expected to marry. The penalty for not doing so is to be the butt of cruel sayings and games about old maids.

The female path is that of love, marriage, and childbearing, not in careers like doctor, lawyer, Indian chief.

The female path does not include running amuck in Cupid's garden. Sex is a male prerogative maintained rigidly by a double standard. Women are victims of a man's right to sex. Boys sow wild oats while "nice girls blush."

Women are told what they should do, which is act like women, and what they should not do, which is act like men; thus the negative reactions to "tomboys" and "whistling girls."

Males are procreatively independent. The female procreative role is usurped by Santa, the stork, the Easter bunny, and others, thus limiting female activity.

The actual state of affairs causes that in various societies of the globe different proverbs and metaphors¹⁵ are frequently linked to the same connotations about daughters, wives or

¹⁴ Note that patriarchy, that has been in existence over the centuries, "[...] is a social system where much of the power rests in the hands of men, who then take advantage to dominate all spheres of life both private and public. It is one of those elements of culture that are a real hindrance to gender parity, that is equality between men and women, especially in terms of rights and power" (<http://www.codesria.org/IMG/pdf/SSETUBA.pdf>).

¹⁵ Note that many metaphors convey biases in favor of particular social groups, among others, women (see Rodriguez 2007). For example such animal metaphors as *chick*, *bird*, *kitten* are often used with reference to women and their implications may hint at stereotypical views of womanhood because women are presented as domestic or livestock animals which in turn might suggest that a woman's place should be confined to the domestic arena. More generally, according to Rodriguez (2009: 83), in English and Spanish, women are often conceptualized in the guise of *bitches/perras*, *chickens/pollitas* and *vixens/zorras*. These animal images roughly correspond with the three main categories with which

widows, in-laws, old age, beauty, love, pregnancy and so forth.¹⁶ Quoting after Schipper (2006: 21), “[...] even exactly the same images occur across cultures, for example, of the womb as a fragile pot (needing protection) or of women as horses (needing fierce male riders), or as hens (needing cocks to speak on their behalf), or as food (with men as avid eaters)”. It appears that, more often than not, women proverbs and animal metaphors expose male chauvinism and do reinforce the stereotypically negative view of the female sex (on this issue see Kleparski 1997).

4. Categorisation of women proverbs

In the history of mankind proverbs have been collected, classified and analysed from classical times to the modern age, both “as informative and useful signs of cultural values and thoughts” (Mieder, 2004: xii). The history of proverb collection is impressively long since the earliest collections date back to the third millennium B.C.¹⁷ Those scholars who deal with collecting and classifying proverbs are referred to as paremiographers,¹⁸ whereas those who occupy themselves with broadly-understood analysis, addressing such questions as the definition, form, structure, style, content, function, meaning, and value of proverbs, are called paremiologists. Paremiology, otherwise labeled as the study of proverbs, has an impressive history as well, stemming from the times of Aristotle and being represented by numerous scholars from many countries.

women are identified, namely, pets, farmyard and wild animals, seen as in dire need of subjugation, domestication and tight control.

¹⁶ Polish proverbs referring to, for instance, women getting old or female good looks may serve as examples: *Każda kobieta dwa razy szaleje – kiedy się kocha i kiedy siwieje* ‘Every woman gets crazy twice – when she is in love and when she goes gray’; *Mężczyzna powinien być troszkę ładniejszy od diabła, a kobieta troszkę brzydsza od anioła* ‘A man should be just a bit more beautiful than a devil, and a woman only a bit uglier than an angel’.

¹⁷ Many proverbs, from numerous proverb collections, may be studied on comparative basis and have been translated into dozens of languages in just the same wording, for example, the Latin proverb *One hand washes the other* and the biblical proverb *Man does not live by bread alone* (see Mieder, 2004: xii).

¹⁸ Major paremiographical Anglo-American proverb collections are as follows: Apperson’s *English Proverbs and Proverbial Phrases: A Historical Dictionary* (1929 [1969, 1993]), Smith’s *The Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs* (1935 [1970, 3rd edition by F.P. Wilson]), Tilley’s *A Dictionary of the Proverbs in England in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (1950), Whiting’s *Proverbs, Sentences, and Proverbial Phrases from English Writings Mainly Before 1500* (1968), Taylor and Whiting’s *A Dictionary of American Proverbs and Proverbial Phrases, 1820–1880* (1958), Whiting’s *Early American Proverbs and Proverbial Phrases* (1977), Whiting’s *Modern Proverbs and Proverbial Sayings* (1989), Kingsbury, Harder and Mieder’s *A Dictionary of American Proverbs* (1992), Titelman’s *Dictionary of Popular Proverbs & Sayings* (1996).

Out of the quantum of English paremiological studies it is adequate to begin with Richard Chenevix Trench and his slim 19th century volume *On the lessons in Proverbs* (1853) and later edition *Proverbs and Their Lessons* (1905). Trench is regarded as a precursor whose work on proverbs in the English-speaking world is still invaluable and most readable. Trench's popular volume was basically replaced by Hulme's treatise titled *Proverb Lore: Being a Historical Study of the Similarities, Contrasts, Topics, Meanings, and Other Facets of Proverbs, Truisms, and Pithy Sayings, as Explained by the Peoples of Many Lands and Times* (1902). The third magisterial volume on European proverbs *The Proverb* (1931) was written by the world's leading paremiologist of the 20th century, namely Archer Taylor. His classic study on the proverb genre was, in turn, reprinted fifty years later by a contemporary prominent proverb scholar Wolfgang Mieder and his work *The Proverb and An Index to 'The Proverb'* (1985). Another great recent study on proverbs by Mieder titled *Proverbs: A Handbook* (2004) puts emphasis on Anglo-American stock of proverbs in English-language contexts lying out this rich field to general readers of English anywhere in the world. Mieder is also the author or editor of over fifty publications on the subject, edits the journal *Proverbium, A Yearbook of International Proverb Scholarship*, has written innumerable articles on proverbs, and is exceptionally widely cited by other proverb scholars.

As it has been the case with all types of proverbs, there have been numerous attempts to classify proverbs about women into categories of common features, that is, according to the type of message they carry. One of the thematic classifications which is most frequently provided by scholars is the division of women proverbs according to either general female characteristics or specific roles and situations (see e.g. Storm, 1992: 168; Kerschen, 1998: 127), as may be presented in what follows:

Women in general: inferiority, stupidity, changeability, ill-nature, talkativeness, weakness, miscellaneous;¹⁹

Women in specific roles or situations: wives, mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, widows,

¹⁹ Classification according to general woman characteristics is merely mentioned in this work because it was already briefly analysed by the author in an article titled 'On How Proverbs and Quotations Aid in Stereotyping (of a Women)' (Kochman-Haladyj 2012). Thus, only the group of proverbs which talks about women in specific roles and situations is given a sketchy description here.

prostitutes, intelligent women, beautiful women.²⁰

According to Kerschen (1998: 19), “the overwhelming majority of proverbs that discuss women in a role deal with women as wives”. And indeed numerous dictionaries of proverbs, such as, for example, *The Routledge Book of World Proverbs* or *The Facts on File Dictionary of Proverbs* offer a wealth of proverbs where the notion of ‘wife’ constitutes the basic element, e.g. *Better a stupid wife than a ruinous house* (Bassari); *Your wife is not a prayer shawl you replace when you don’t like her anymore* (Hebrew); *A bad wife is not a good mother* (Spanish); *A wife is [like] a protecting wall for her husband* (Hebrew); *A wife is a young man’s slave and an old man’s darling*.

Many proverbs belonging to this group grumble about the radical change that takes place in girls the moment they have become wives. This observation may be exemplified by means of the following proverbs coming from different cultures: *Girls are beautiful, sweet and tender; where do all those wicked wives come from?* (Russian); *All are good girls, but where do the bad wives come from?* (English, USA); *As long as she is with her mother, kind as a lamb; as soon as she has got a husband, she pulls out a long-drawn tongue* (Serbian/Croatian). Within a marriage it is the wife who is usually blamed for causing most problems, as in e.g. *When a man takes a wife, he ceases to dread hell* (American). Consequently men are often warned against and advised in proverbs, for example, *He who has a wife has a master; When you choose a wife shut your eyes and commend your soul to God*. A large number of proverbs advise husbands to be particularly alert and careful if they marry a beautiful wife because then they are prone to be asking for trouble, as in for instance American proverbs *If you marry a beautiful blonde, you marry trouble; The wife who loves the looking glass hates the saucepan*.

In terms of expectations related to fidelity the so called double standard is clearly visible. A good wife is expected to be faithful, as in for instance *A faithless wife is the shipwreck of the home* whereas fidelity of a husband is not treated seriously, as in the proverb *If a man is*

²⁰ Other possible grouping that could be suggested for further analysis is that “[...] according to images such as woman as madonna, woman as Eve or Magdalene, woman as nurturer or childlike dependent, and so on” (Kerschen, 1998: 128). An important question that should be asked at this point is how these pictures have changed over time and how this transformation has been reflected in the proverbs. Another more general factor touches the image change when it comes to the comparison of proverbs about women from one country to the next.

unfaithful to his wife, it's like spitting from a house into the street; but if a woman is unfaithful to her husband, it's like spitting from the street into the house (American).

Even cursory analysis of proverbs with women viewed as wives enables one to form a clear portrait of an ideal wife, which may be exemplified with the use of one proverb, namely *A good wife is a perfect lady in the living room, a good cook in the kitchen, and a harlot in the bedroom*. In other words, a wife exists to be of service to her husband as a hostess, cook and lover. Anything else and she turns into a troublesome shrew who brings a man only misery, as in e.g. *A bad wife is like a dreary, rainy day* (Hebrew) (see Kerschen, 1998: 22). Other universal qualities that are required from wives are chastity, devotion and zeal in female domains. She is the one who takes care of her husband, his health, needs and sex life without ever moaning and grumbling. Still other proverbs from different cultures that present women in terms of expected roles and behaviour are, e.g. *You can tell the husband of a good wife by his clothes* (Turkish/Bulgarian); *He that hath a good wife shows it in his dress* (English, USA); *Glorify your husband; glorify him with a cassava root. (Love is expressed in good food and other good deeds.)* (Yaka); *A woman who does not take care of her husband, cannot be a good wife* (Kru); *A good wife will reduce sorrows to half their size and increase fortune to double the amount* (Hebrew, Georgia/Israel).

Everywhere in the world, as pointed out by Schipper (2006: 141), *mothers-in-law are at the proverbial centre of negative in-law qualifications* because – needless to say – in-law relations are almost exceptionlessly regarded as inferior to blood relations, as expressed in the African proverb *Birth comes first, marriage follows*. A negatively coloured perception of mothers-in-law is reflected in numerous proverbs worldwide, for instance *There are as many good step-mothers as white ravens* (American); *A mother-in-law is not a relative but a punishment* (Portuguese, Brazil); *There is only one good mother-in-law and she is dead* (American); *Forty leagues down from hell there is a special hell for mothers-in-law* (Spanish, Colombia). As much as mothers are adored and praised (e.g. *God could not be everywhere, therefore He made mothers; Heaven is at the feet of mothers; There is no such thing as a bad mother*), mothers-in-law are often detested, vilified and associated with the devil and hell in proverbs (e.g. *'More by hit than by wit,' said the man when, throwing a stone at his dog, he struck his mother-in-law* (Danish); *The husband's mother is the wife's devil* (German); *Forty leagues down from hell there is a special hell for mothers-in-law* (Spanish, Colombia)). Other

negative attributes ascribed to mothers-in-law are seen in terms of their usually bad relations with daughters-in-law, towards whom they feel hatred, e.g. *Always sweep where your mother-in-law looks* (New Mexico), treat like aliens, give orders and constantly meddle, e.g. *A mother-in-law is like a pig's snout digging here and digging there* (Yaka). Moreover, mothers-in-law are unreliable, vengeful and their friendliness is suspect, as may be demonstrated with the following proverbs: *Who counts on his mother-in-law's soup, will go to sleep without dinner* (Creole, Dominican Republic); *Never rely on the glory of a morning or on the smiles of your mother-in-law* (Japanese); *The friendship of a mother-in-law is like dry weather in the wet season* (Papiamentu); *Friendship between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law only goes as deep as the teeth [of the smile]* (Portuguese, Brazil).

Similarly, the attitude towards daughters-in-law is that of resentment and hatred as they are treated as intruders who join the family, often coming to live in your own house (see e.g. a Chinese proverb *A new daughter-in-law entering the house is for the mother-in-law her own funeral*). The harrowing difficulties experienced by daughters-in-law may be found in proverbs of different cultures (as expressed by, for example, a Finnish proverb *Rarely is a servant praised, a daughter-in-law never*; a Korean proverb *Good deeds of a daughter-in-law or a cat go unnoticed*; or a proverb from India *If a mother-in-law breaks a huge vessel, it is nothing; if the daughter-in-law breaks a tiny bowl, the household is ruined*). Mothers-in-law comment negatively on whatever displeases them, constantly following their daughters-in-law with critical eyes and ears (see e.g. Russian proverbs *The wicked mother-in-law has eyes at the back*; *The evil mother-in-law has also ears at the back*). If the poor young women want to be on good terms with their mothers-in-law they need to be patient, submissive and obedient, as explicitly stated in the Estonian proverb *A daughter-in-law has a horse's patience and a dog's obedience*. Another piece of advice, suggesting a global tendency, given to daughters-in-law is expressed in the proverb existing in many parts of the world, namely *Always sweep where your mother-in-law looks* (English, USA; Spanish, Dominican Republic; Hebrew, Israel).

Out of the quantum of women-related proverbs there is a group whose main subject is perception of widows, which is also in most cases worldwide valued negatively, as in an exemplary Danish proverb *He that marries a widow and four children marries four thieves* (Danish; Pacific Northwest). There are many communities where the position of women is still strongly determined by their marriage and consequently *Widows are the leftovers from dead*

men (a Portuguese proverb from Brazil) without any identity or purpose (e.g. *A widow is a boat without a rudder*). It is commonly assumed that the loss of a husband means loss of status for the wife which is well expressed through the Minyanka metaphor of the fallen tree: *The baobab has fallen; now the goats start climbing on it* (Mali). Moreover, marrying a widow is another issue which often causes nasty remarks, connected with, for instance the high cost (e.g. *He that marries a widow with two daughters has three back doors to his house*) or a lot of grief if he is compared to the first husband (e.g. *He that marries a widow will often have a dead man's head thrown into his dish; Never marry a widow unless her first husband was hanged*). In general, as indicated by Schipper (2006: 121) *proverbs reflect the issues that make life most difficult for widows* both because of their actual bad life situation and representation of society's stereotype that women were meant for marriage and the guardianship of a husband.

Another group of proverbs is the one that contributes to double standard discussed in relation to the oldest profession in the world, that is prostitution. Although the demand for prostitutes is created by men, they, that is men, are the first to condemn prostitutes on moral grounds (e.g. *Like a bucket in the public bath, use a whore but pass her on* (Arabic)). Prostitutes belong to this group of women who live alone, others are spinsters and widows. The three categories distinguished do not conform to social expectations and thus become the object of gossip and ridicule. They are often considered deviant, seen as outcasts and therefore suspect (Schipper, 2008: 98).

In almost all cultures prostitution is regarded as a humiliating and degrading occupation, however there are proverbs which show it as a rewarding activity, for instance *'If I get a chance, I will marry; if I fail, I will live by prostitution,' said the spinster* (Oromo). Moreover, men are possibly blamed for wasting their money on prostitutes, but not for having sex with them, as may be demonstrated in an English proverb *Whores affect not you but your money*. In the Western part of the world prostitution is presented as the opposite of wedlock, however, there is also a well-known proverb, already mentioned above, that establishes a certain equation mark (of male wishful thinking?) between wives and prostitutes by including the two roles in marriage: *A good wife is a perfect lady in the living room, a good cook in the kitchen, and a whore in bed* (Dutch/English, UK/USA).

Brain as a metaphor for intelligence frequently constitutes an element of proverbs referring to both sexes. It is men who are predominantly equated with intelligence, wisdom and talents whereas women are mainly associated with feelings, emotions, lack of logic and irrationality. The stereotype of a brainless female may be illustrated by means of the following proverbs: *A woman has the shape of an angel, the heart of a snake, and the brains of an ass* (German); *Woman's intelligence is a child's intelligence* (West Africa); *When an ass climbs a ladder, we may find wisdom in women*. Furthermore, it is often emphasized that attractive women, particularly those with beautiful hair, lack intelligence, as may be shown in a number of examples from various natural languages picked at random: *A head of hair and no brain inside* (Mongolian); *Women have long hair and a short mind* (Swedish); *Though a girl's hair be long, her brain is short* (Kalmuk); *Long hair, little brain* (Turkish). Other proverbs which emphasize no brain in beautiful women are *More beauty than a peacock, but the intelligence of a block of wood* (Mongolian); *A doll's head and an empty brain* (Polish).

As indicated by Schipper (2006: 68), *the female body and its aesthetic dimensions are submitted to endless (mainly) male comment*.²¹ In spite of cultural differences women's beauty is praised everywhere and *A beauty is a joy to everyone* (Turkey). There is a substantial group of proverbs worldwide where female looks and women's beautifying practices are discussed in all their varieties and detail, as may be shown in the following Asian proverbs: *A woman's beauty makes fish sink and wild geese fall from the sky* (Chinese); *Beautiful the girl who looks like a peony when she sits, like a columbine when she stands, and like a lily when she walks* (Japanese); *A beautiful woman is like newly forged gold* (Indonesian); *When three women join together, the stars come out in broad daylight* (Telugu); *A radiant beauty says to the moon: 'Don't bother to rise; I will.'* (Persian).

On the basis of nothing but appearance, beautiful girls and women are presented as highly influential and powerful (e.g. *A pretty face is the key to locked doors* (Tajik); *Even an angel cannot resist a beautiful girl* (Hebrew)) whose men would love to caress and serve (e.g. *A beautiful woman stands on the palm of the hand* (English, Hawaii)) and towards whom men are suspicious and distrustful (e.g. *A very beautiful woman is either a witch or a prostitute*

²¹ Note the fact that there are beauty pageants for women but not for men. In effect the exaggerated importance placed on a woman's appearance is a part of feminist debates which are to change the attitude suggesting that woman's only value rests on her beauty.

(Sara). However, in the Western countries, as Schipper (2006: 36) emphasizes, “Judeo-Christian ideas have incessantly alerted men to the dangers of womankind in general and to attractive female bodies in particular”, as may be exemplified in the following proverbs: *Keep afar from the love of women, for their beauty is lewdness and their body a graveyard of lust* (Hebrew); *A pretty woman has the Devil in her body* (German). Moreover, beautiful women are often criticized for their efforts to enhance good looks both because of the time and expense invested in clothes, makeup, and hairstyles (see, for example, American proverbs *She was melted and poured into her dress; She’s painted up like a wild Indian; The smiles of the pretty woman are the tears of the purse*). Another claim is that beauty is frequently intermingled with women’s vanity as expressed in probably the most well-known proverb of several on the subject *Vanity thy name is woman*.

Female beauty is frequently discussed in association with its opposite, that is ugliness, as in *The beautiful one laughs and lets the ugly one cry* (Papiamentu). What seems justified, ugliness may often be perceived as a benefit because only then a woman is safe from being attacked by lascivious men (as in American proverbs *Plain women are as safe as churches; Ugliness is the guardian of women*). However, in most cases ugliness is ostracized and ridiculed (see, for instance such American proverbs as *Don’t dare kiss an ugly girl - she’ll tell the world about it; Compliment an old hag on her lovely appearance and she’ll take you at your word*).

Conclusion

To sum up, proverbs, as short pithy expressions, are among the most accurate index of people’s life and thought that exist in natural languages. They are truly important because they are regarded both as indicators of societal norms and very useful tools in examining contemporary values and cultural patterns. Through their close relationship with tradition and folklore one may explore the historical image of, among others, women and find out that proverbs that focus on female kind tend to fall into certain categories. The classes of certain characteristics, such as, for instance, those referring to the female body, phases of life or features of character allow us to conclude that most female-oriented proverbs carry universal messages, thus easily comprehended in various cultures of the world.

As has been observed, a large number of proverbs can operate negatively for women. The picture of wives, mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, widows, prostitutes, intelligent women

and beautiful women may be presented by means of certain constitutive elements that stick out as labels in all proverbial expressions. The element that is frequently associated with those proverbs that are dedicated to female kind in various roles and situations, is that of being, for instance, vain (e.g. *Vanity thy name is woman*), unintelligent (e.g. *When an ass climbs a ladder, we may find wisdom in women*), unfaithful (e.g. *A faithless wife is the shipwreck of the home*), troublesome (e.g. *A bad wife is like a dreary, rainy day*), unreliable (e.g. *Who counts on his mother-in-law's soup, will go to sleep without dinner*) and mostly preoccupied with beauty (e.g. *She's painted up like a wild Indian*). Moreover, woman taking a role of, for example, a wife is expected to be engaged in and thus restricted to home and family-oriented issues (e.g. *A good wife is a perfect lady in the living room, a good cook in the kitchen, and a harlot in the bedroom; A woman who does not take care of her husband, cannot be a good wife*) whereas woman as a widow is undoubtedly at the lost position because her status, in most cultures of the world, is still strongly determined by marriage (*Widows are the leftovers from dead men*).

Be that as it may, women move into various forms of emancipation and consequently the world today does not fully reflect the past women stereotypes. "With the assumption that proverbs do still teach each generation their culture, these proverbs are then detrimental to the progress of women's fulfillment" (Kerschen, 1998: 124). What is required from people in all societies is learning to let others be themselves without labels, assumptions or categories. As Kerschen (1998: 104) highlights, "being, for instance, a wife, a mother, or a widow is not an all-consuming occupation or identity; it is just one aspect of a woman's life and her relationships with others".

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