



## GENDER IN TURKISH PROVERBS

### Türk Atasözlerinde Toplumsal Cinsiyet

Asst. Prof. Gökçen KARA

Haliç University, Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Department of American Culture and Literature, İstanbul/TURKEY

ORCID: 0000-0002-6048-3644

**Cite As:** Kara, G. (2021). "Gender In Turkish Proverbs", International Social Mentality and Researcher Thinkers Journal, (Issn:2630-631X) 7(49): 2049-2054.

#### ABSTRACT

Since the early twentieth century, with the birth of feminism, gender studies have been examined in a variety of disciplines of knowledge. A special emphasis has been placed on gender and language, as well as the abundance of female-biased and paucity of male-biased expressions. The article analyzes the representations of men and women portrayed in Turkish proverbs. The aim of this study is to determine whether proverbs are gendered and convey male ideologies and world views. This paper also seeks to demonstrate the deep discursive and intercultural connections between the ways proverbs reflect women's roles and status in Turkey. With this purpose, gender-based proverbs were chosen and the semantic research was performed. This paper claims that language is used to support gender inequities systematically. Ömer Asım Aksoy's Dictionary of Proverbs and Idioms was used in the selection of proverbs that are the source of this study, and the proverbs related to men and women in this dictionary were examined.

**Key words:** Gender, proverbs, patriarchal ideologies

#### ÖZET

Yirminci yüzyılın başlarından itibaren feminizmin kuramsal olarak ortaya çıkması ile birlikte toplumsal cinsiyet çalışmaları çeşitli bilgi disiplinlerinde incelenmiştir. Cinsiyet ve dilin yanı sıra kadın-önyargılı ifadelerin fazla olması ve erkek-önyargılı ifadelerin az olmasına özel bir vurgu yapılmıştır. Bu makale, Türk atasözlerinde tasvir edilen kadın ve erkek temsillerini incelemektedir. Bu çalışmanın amacı, atasözlerinin cinsiyetçi olup olmadığını tespit etmek, erkek ideolojilerini ve dünya görüşlerini aktarmaktır. Bu makale aynı zamanda atasözlerinin Türkiye'de kadının rollerini ve statüsünü yansıtmaya biçimleri arasındaki derin söylemsel ve kültürel bağları ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu amaçla cinsiyet temelli atasözleri seçilmiş ve anlam araştırması yapılmıştır. Bu makale, dilin sistematik olarak toplumsal cinsiyet eşitsizliklerini desteklemek için kullanıldığını ortaya koymaktadır. Bu çalışmaya kaynaklık eden atasözlerinin seçiminde Ömer Asım Aksoy'un Atasözleri ve Deyimler Sözlüğü kullanılmış ve bu sözlükte geçen kadın ve erkek ile ilgili olan atasözleri incelenmiştir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Cinsiyet, atasözleri, ataerkil ideolojiler

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

Language is the most important tool that gives individuals the opportunity to communicate with each other. The realities are reflected through language. Interaction occurs between the mind and language, thereby making language and the mind equally interactive. Culture has influence on language, and because of this, languages are never able to resist the cultural movement that has taken place. Words and their associated cultural connotations may go beyond language, meaning the societal makeup of a social group. Interacting with a language involves participating in the society that the language serves as a reference point. Language reflects cultural traditions and processes and thus has an effect on human thought, social practices, and power dynamics in society. A long history of research has substantiated how language affects human thought processes and behavior, including works by linguistics scholars (e.g. Whorf, 1956; Sapir, 1958; Lucy, 1992), anthropologists (e.g. Boas, 1966), philosophers (e.g. Kuhn, 1962; Lakoff and Johnson, 1980a), and psychologists Pelechano Barbera (1990). Such study confirms that language serves as both a medium of communication and a reflection of culture. Because language and mind are inextricably linked, the cultural differences between societies can be explained in part by this fact. Our native language, which we have been exposed to since birth, helps us to perceive certain concepts and to form our thoughts around these concepts. From the moment of birth, language begins to shape a person's perception of the world. This is explained by Ludwig Wittgenstein, who stated: "The boundaries of my language are the boundaries of my world" (2012, 45). In light of language's propensity to address the entire human experience, Wittgenstein emphasizes that language and reality are almost indistinguishable. Language and reality are mutually connected; language cannot be considered apart from reality. According to the linguistic relativity hypothesis of Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf, language does not only reflect reality, but also affects thinking.

Language is capable of being used to propagate a political or social movement, as well as to control the thinking of those who are exposed to it. Each society's language is a result of its own ideology, which is expressed through the language. Language is socially produced and utilized as a potent means of oppression, and language holds a critical role in the conflict between men and women. Because gender is an ideology, the language used to express it is constructed accordingly.

Gender issues and language have taken a more prominent role in feminist discourse in recent years. Simone de Beauvoir says that women are not born, but rather are made. Being made, in this view, is a process of social creation in which language, particularly proverbs, takes central place. According to Chinua Achebe, a renowned Nigerian novelist, "proverbs are the oil with which words are eaten" (2019: 37).

Feminists are attempting to analyze ideology from a theoretical perspective, looking at gender identification and sexual difference in connection to ideology. They complain about gender-based linguistic expressions that disenfranchise women in all realms. Historically, the transition to patriarchal order and the emergence of language coincide. So therefore, male dominance and language are both intimately connected. When the male was socially involved in the outside world, it was also his job to see the outside world and to describe it. The people who need rules, laws and order in the external world have made arrangements in the public domain based on the male. Since the lawmakers are the men who carry out all kinds of tasks in the public and those who express them, the language has become their instrument and they have used this tool as they wish. When the culture began to be masculine, the language became masculine too. Because patriarchal ideology was the dominant ideology, the woman was forced to remain within the confines of the patriarchal discourse. Feminists argued that women were forced to live in a language that was created by males, which prohibited them from expressing themselves.

Cross-cultural research on gender ideas is spurred by the rise of the women's liberation movement which originated in the United States and then moved to Europe and other areas of the world. It has been over thirty years since gender and linguistic studies have developed together. It provides a starting point for the project to explore society's ideas about men and women. The theoretical groundwork about language and gender is being laid by feminists to analyze ideology and its connection to gender identification and sexual difference. Politically, they are becoming vocal about linguistic constraints that disenfranchise women in all aspects of society. Dale Spender (2001: 58) claims that men have purposefully:

Formulated a semantic rule which posits them central and positive as the norm, and they have classified the world from that standpoint, constructing a symbolic system which represents patriarchal order.

In other words, by being classified by semantics, women are objectified and viewed as less than fully human. Language, as a tool of expression, reflects the interests of the people. Men define language, preventing women from having any influence on the linguistic process and they maintain their control and protect their own interests.

Language is a vital part of the cultural life of any group of people. As Deborah Cameron (1999) points out, it encodes a culture's preoccupations as well as its moral standards. It also serves as a primary conduit for the transmission of culture from generation to generation as well as to others who have access to a community's resources. Within this framework, the problem of how women and gender are depicted in language has come to be an important point in the feminist debate. The feminist view is that all languages are potentially sexist. A common criticism claims that the world is male-dominated and imposes traditional ideas about women through the language. To support this claim, it's generally agreed in feminist circles that language itself is one of the most fundamental patriarchal structures, which is typically employed as a tool of manipulation. Language is the main medium of expression in literature. Language serves both as a primary tool through which ideas are analyzed and as a kind of societal discourse. The usage of proverbs provides a means for this system's enunciation. Along with other forms of oration, proverbs reinforce the customary views of society.

Linguistic review of oral traditions has often been conducted from a variety of perspectives. Proverbs are one of these traditions that have served as a focal point for sociolinguistic studies. Many traditions have expressed the reality of life with gender stereotypes in proverbs, which have been shown to be sexist.

Proverbs are condensed sayings that are usually utilized to explain social truths in a concise manner. They evolved through oral tradition and have remained essentially the same for centuries. Being a reflection of society's conventional ideals, they are commonly accepted without scrutiny. The conventional gender relationships that proverbs reflect can be found in their uses of gender in general. The etymologies of

proverbs are derived from precision, from having originated in human experience, from being societal phenomena, from folklore, and from basic truth. Proverbs offer a general perspective on life and are known to function as a kind of folk wisdom. In other words, proverbs represent the general social norms, beliefs, and values of a society, since they express the insights of the majority of people. The only thing that differs from one language and culture to another is the choice of language, the employment of rhetorical methods, and the application of imagery. Language has a crucial role in the formation of material reality, and the relationship between language and power cannot be ignored in this context. Additionally, conventional language forms and the usage of masculine generic, which reinforces male stereotypes, have a negative psychological impact. According to Mieder (2008: 14) “Proverbs, like riddles, jokes or fairy tales, do not fall out of the sky and neither are they products of a mythical soul of the folk. Instead they are always coined by an individual either intentionally or unintentionally.”

People in different societies view men and women differently, which is evident by examining the words and phrases found in various societies. For example, a Rajasthani proverb says “When a girl is born, don’t take care of her, she will grow like a cactus; when a boy is born, take good care of him, as you would with a rose tree” (Schipper, 2010: 31). In this instance, oral tradition of proverbs offers a varied view of how women have been viewed by different cultures, offering insight into these perceptions. It is typical for patriarchal civilizations to have women expected to obey the men in their household, including their fathers, husbands, brothers, and sons. Similarly, in many communities it is accepted and expected that a girl will be married at a young age, and it is during this time that she is taught to be obedient. In proverbs “Women are mostly associated with beauty, and men with intelligence” (Schipper, 2010: 41).

When it comes to understanding the state of women in traditional societies, proverbs are extremely valuable resources. Women and their responsibilities are constantly reflected and defined by proverbs that have persisted throughout history. These include the definition of women as being reliant on males, portrayals of women as imprudent, fragile, envious, evil, needy, and immature.

## 2. GENDER IN TURKISH PROVERBS

Although it is difficult to trace the origins of proverbs, Gilbert and Tompkins define proverbs as follows: “Proverbs are short, easily remembered pithy statements that are passed on from generation to generation. They sometimes recall oral forms of history and culture” (1996: 182). Proverbs are an extremely old type of literature device, dating back generations. There are many examples in several of the works of Pindar, Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, as well as in Terence's writings.

Having their origins in oral tradition, proverbs present ideas about the accumulated wisdom of a society. As a manifestation of traditional values, proverbs express general truths or practical rules of a community. Proverbs and idioms are closely associated with cultures and, thus, reflect the experiences and clues about a certain culture. Idioms are stereotypes that are formed by the use of multiple words to express a particular concept, emotion, or situation. Idioms provide clues that explain the history, the way of life, and traditions of a language. There is a great distinction between languages in terms of idioms. Idioms have a significant place in language because they reflect social beliefs. “Values and beliefs are codified and manifested in all aspects of linguistic communication, such as popular expressions, shared vocabulary, oral traditions, conversational rules and modes of interaction, and even linguistic modes of creativity” (Barajas, 2010: 42).

Proverbs are the products of long observation and experiences to explain an event and to clarify a situation. The proverbs in a society in this sense give information about its religious, political, and social structure. Proverbs are also used to construct gender relations. As Bakhtin says, there are no natural words, i.e., “All words have a taste of a profession, a genre, a tendency, a particular work, a particular person, a generation, an age group, the day and hour ... the contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life” (Bakhtin, 2000: 293).

Each society develops its own definitions of masculinity and femininity. Proverbs construct gender-related messages and show how gender is perceived in that culture. It appears that proverbs have played a crucial role in maintaining gender roles, serving as a means of communicating a general concept of masculinity and femininity. These works have also attempted to demonstrate that sexist proverbs can provide their users with insights into the broader discourse of gender as it is implemented through various symbolic and material representations. It is possible to illustrate how proverbs are used to rationalize inequality by referring to Michel Foucault's “regime of truth”:

Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (1980:131)

In this regard, proverbs are seen to be apparent expressions of men's power inside the patriarchal system, which has been re-created and rebuilt to validate the illusion of male superiority. Turkish proverbs and idioms have negative values, judgments and attitudes towards women. Some of these proverbs might be seen as promoting misogyny with the objective of helping to preserve and legitimize the male-dominated social order. For example, a Turkish proverb asserts that giving birth to a son makes the woman privileged:

Ođlan doguran övünsün, kız doguran dövünsün. (Let the one who bears a son be proud, let the one who bears a daughter beat herself)

It can be seen from this proverb that a woman is highly esteemed in her role as the mother of a male child. Responsibilities required by the gender roles are important factors in determining gender in Turkish culture as in all cultures.

Some parents have expectations for their sons and daughters. Some parents also attribute stereotypical characteristics to their children. Accordingly, children learn what it means to be feminine and masculine from their family. In Turkish society, the responsibility of having daughters leads families to prefer having sons. Turkish families also contribute to the social life of their sons, while they want their daughters to stay at home.

According to Albert Bandura's social learning theory, children observe the people around them and behave accordingly. Hence, considering a person to be a role model, has an important place in the socialization process, since social roles can be learned through observation. Accordingly, it is a natural and common process for a daughter to take her mother as a role model, because a mother may be the person closest to the daughter. The daughter is also dependent on the mother.

A mother's parenting style significantly effects their daughter(s). Hence, the determinants of cultural and social transfers in the proverbs exist (i.e., *anasına bak, kızını al* (like mother, like daughter), *anasının kızı* (be one's mother's daughter)).

Many of the proverbs and idioms handled in the context of the daughter are related to the daughter's marriage. These include:

Kız beşikte çeyizi sandıkta (daughter is in the cradle, dowry is in the chest)

On beşinde kız ya erde gerek ya yerde (when the daughter is fifteen, she should be espoused, or she will be on the streets).

These proverbs and idioms illustrate that the Turkish society attaches importance to marriage in relation to a social life. They also show that a daughter should be espoused at a young age. Traditionally in Turkey, the hopeful groom goes to the girl's house and asks her father for her hand in marriage. In the proverbs and idioms examined, it is possible to see that women have a secondary position in marital negotiations: "*kız kaçırma*" (to elope with a girl), "*kız almak*" (to wive), *bir kız bin kişi ister bir kişi alır* (Only one man marries a woman although one thousand men want to marry her), "*kız vermek*" (to give away one's daughter in marriage)

In some of the proverbs examined, the discrimination between sexes is very clear. In other words, proverbs perpetuate existing gender relations and power structures.

Ođlan babadan öğrenir sofraya açmayı, kız anadan öğrenir biçki biçmeyi (boys learn how to earn money from their fathers, and girls learn how to sew from their mothers).

It is obvious from the proverbs that boys and girls have separate tasks. In addition to this, it is also emphasized that fathers should be models for their sons and mothers should be models for daughters.

For centuries, fathers have represented power throughout the world. Decisions in Turkish families are made by the father. When something happens to father, he is the son to replace his father. Just as in mother-daughter relations, it is possible to evaluate father-son relations according to social cognitive theory. Fathers



are the primary role models for boys. Proverbs like *babanın sanatı oğluna mirastır* (the art of the father is his son's inheritance) exemplify father-son relations.

Several proverbs deal with the role of the son in the family. In the Turkish family system, the boy is seen as the person who continues the family bloodline and transfers the family name to the next generations: *Ağaç yeşert meyve getirsin, oğlan büyüt ekmek getirsin* (grow a tree and get the fruit, raise a son so that he can bring home the bacon) and *buğdayım var deme ambara girmeyince, oğlum var deme yoksulluğa ermeyince* (don't say, "I have wheat" when you don't enter the warehouse; don't say, "I have a son" when you are driven into poverty) show that male children are expected to be breadwinners for their family, while staying at home is seen as the daughter's duty.

In Turkey, the duty of providing for the household is attributed to the man. In fact, it is not a situation that is tolerated by the society for women to contribute to the household economically. This situation also manifests itself in some proverbs:

*Karı malı hamam tokmağıdır.* (A woman's property is a door latch).

The above proverb means that a man should not think of taking advantage of his wife's property. As a matter of fact, men should ensure their superiority at home and should never lose their influence.

Considering the domestic duties and responsibilities of the woman, it can be said that she primarily assumes the role of being a wife. Before a woman becomes a mother, she takes the responsibility of being a wife. It is quite understandable and acceptable that this is the case according to the order in the flow of social life.

Especially in societies where the patriarchal family structure is dominant, the position of the man is perceived according to his wife. Being the secret founder of the family, the woman also plays an important role in the social prestige of the man. Proverbs that confirm this are:

*"Evi ev eden avrat (kadın), yurdu şen eden devlet."* (It is the woman who makes the house, it is the state that makes the country happy).

*"Kadın erkeğin eşi, evin güneşidir."* (Woman is the wife of a man, the sun of the house).

*"Kadın var, arpa ununu aş eder, kadın var buğday ununu taş eder."* (Some women make a meal from barley flour, some women turn wheat flour into stone).

*"Erkek getirmeyi, kadın yetirmeyi bilmeli"* (A man should know how to provide for the house, and a woman should know the economics of the house).

It can be understood from the proverbs above that the responsibilities imposed on women in society are limited to domestic roles. When the proverbs that are the subject of this study are examined, it is seen that women are perceived as the 'second sex' with their domestic obligations and roles.

### 3. CONCLUSION

Although the cultural values formed by language are a bridge between today's generations and the past, and are formations that enable them to reach the future, the stereotyped thoughts reflected by the language should be re-examined with the egalitarian understanding that today's democratic values offer to women and men.

Proverbs that define women in the 'special' area expect women to conform to society's expectations. This submissiveness is valued in Turkey and this submissiveness leads to the view that a woman should be silent when necessary and should be able to resist all difficulties with her husband. Although today's changing social and economic structure affects values about women, the effects of oral culture, folk narratives and proverbs can still be seen in society. The proverbs, based on our ancestors' experiences and observations, continue to be a guide in our everyday life. As a result, when proverbs and idioms are examined in terms of gender, they can be said to be under the influence of various social experiences. The proverbs mirror the cultural norms, beliefs and values of Turkish culture.

When the researches on proverbs and idioms are examined, it is seen that the social roles of women have been devalued from past to present and women have been marginalized compared to men; On the other hand, it is seen that men are described as dominant and strong individuals

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

- Aksoy, O. A. (1981). *Atasözleri ve deyimler sözlüğü*. Ankara, TDK.
- Achebe, C. (2019). *Things Fall Apart*. New York, Penguin Publishing Group.
- Bakhtin, M. M. (2000). *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Austin, University of Texas Press.
- Barajas, D. E. (2010). *The Function of Proverbs in Discourse: The Case of a Mexican Transnational Social Network*. New York, NY, Mouton de Gruyter.
- Cameron, D. (1999). *The Feminist Critique of Language: A reader*. London, Routledge.
- Foucault, M., Gordon, C. T., & Gordon, C. (1980). *Power / knowledge*. New York, Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Gilbert, H., & Tompkins, J. (1996). *Post-colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics*. London, Routledge.
- Mieder, W. (2008). *Proverbs Speak Louder Than Words: Wisdom in Art, Culture, Folklore, History, Literature and Mass Media*. New York, Peter Lang
- Spender, D. (2001). *Man Made Language*. London, Pandora.
- Schipper, M. (2010). *Never Marry a Woman with Big Feet: Women in Proverbs from around the World*. Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press.
- Wittgenstein, L., & Granger, G. (2012). *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Paris, Gallimard.