

The Image of Women in Yemeni Proverbs

Nada Qanbar

Assistant Professor, Dept. of English, Taiz University, Yemen

This paper attempts to study the image of women in Yemeni proverbs and whether this image changes with age and social role. Women's image in the Yemeni proverbs has been found to have two sides: the negative side which occupies the major part, and the positive one which is marginal and extremely weak. Almost all proverbs degrade and devalue women. This negative image is deeply ingrained in the society and does not change with their age or social role. The paper takes a step further and investigates the contemporary perception of the males and females in the society in these proverbs. The author designed a questionnaire which includes some Yemeni proverbs on women, and administered it to 50 males and 50 females. It was found that both sexes approved of the negative image of women in the proverbs with varying degrees, which clearly shows that, besides being a patriarchal society, women also may seem to acquiesce in the stereotypical denunciation of women and gender discrimination ideologies against women through their socializing role at home.

Keywords: Proverbs, Culture, discrimination, image of women, oral tradition, Language.

1. Introduction

Proverbs, like other oral traditions, are an important literary genre of Yemeni society. They play a key role in constructing culture and shaping the reality of people and their moral consciousness, opinions and beliefs (Fasiku 41). Each culture has proverbs that are unique to it. The saying, "If you want to know the people of a nation, know their proverbs" illustrates the fact that the national and cultural identity of the people and their perspectives are greatly shaped by proverbs. They are the foundation of social and cultural wisdom and, therefore, serve as the basis for formulating concepts that govern social relations. Centered on their ability to capture human experience in a few words through a clear metaphor of profound implication and their fast spread across society, proverbs acquire the power to impose a given view of life as unshakable and absolute truth (Ssetuba 32). They reflect a people's basic way of thinking and experiencing, and represent the unfocused, unor-

iented and universal philosophies through abstract generalizations and integration of diverse phenomena. Proverbs are also considered a paradigm for cultural studies (Grzybek 65).

The study of proverbs is important for enriching our collective identity, and for understanding ourselves and our relations and positions in society. The significance of proverbs emanates from their power as social laws which everyone is subject to (AL-Ali 28). And as they are part of the past and represent cumulative wisdom of the people across generations, they cast a spell over minds and behaviors, and generally guide people in their daily life (Afarfar 57). Some authors like F. Al-Marneesi go to the extent that proverbs have an absolute authority over people exactly like the political authority (17).

Undoubtedly, proverbs are expressed through language. Language is a symbolic act of both representing and valuing things. We cannot separate what we say about something from our attitude towards that thing. As Robin Lakoff puts it, "If it is indeed true that our feelings about the world color our expression of our thoughts, then we can use our linguistic behavior as diagnostic of our hidden feelings about thoughts" (53) And as Dan Hahn also stated, "...what we call something summarizes our attitude towards it" (149) Similarly, what a society says through proverbs about women and men is the society's attitude of women and men (Oha 90). Language is used to produce and reproduce cultural experiences. As a social and cultural phenomenon, it is used to communicate every aspect of cultural experience in a society. This means that language expresses, embodies, and symbolizes cultural reality (Kramsch 59). One function of language is to communicate a society's gender ideology. It is a tool that reinforces "the boundary lines among genders and ensures that what is demanded, what is permitted, and what is tabooed for the people in each gender is well known and followed by most" (Lorber 193).

The position of women in society, therefore, is greatly influenced by the interplay between proverbs and language. This interrelation between proverbs and language prompts us to take a close look at the Yemeni proverbs that construct a particular image of women in Yemeni society.

2. Objectives of The Study

This paper aims at studying the image of women as manifested in Yemeni proverbs. The study attempts to address the following questions:

- 1 - What is the nature of the image of women in the Yemeni society as projected by Yemeni proverbs?
- 2 - Does this image change with the age and the social role of women?

- 3 - Is there a difference between the male's and female's perception of the image of women in the Yemeni society?

The study first explores the image of the woman in Yemeni proverbs, and then evaluates how men and women of the society perceive the image of the Yemeni women as expressed in Yemeni proverbs.

3. Literature Review

The study of gendered culture which is partly manifested in oral tradition has been done from a sociological, anthropological, sociolinguistic, linguistic and social psychology perspective (Holmes 21; Lakoff 18; Oha 87; Harris 36). To the best of my knowledge, there is no systematic academic study in a specific theoretical framework of the gendered traditions and women in the Yemeni social discourse.

Hiroko Storm examined the Japanese proverbs antedating World War II as well as those that appeared after the war in order to ascertain how women were perceived in the Japanese culture. He made a survey which sought to clarify contemporary Japanese attitudes toward women and how this perception was influenced by their age and gender, and length of residence abroad. He found that there were similarities between the responses of both men and women. Responses varied with age as the older generation gave higher ratings to negative characteristics. People who resided abroad, on the other hand, did not differ in their responses from those who lived in Japan.

Basanti Devi held the view that the image of women in Indian proverbs is not dissimilar to the image of the Japanese women. Her research revealed that there is a clear-cut pattern of gender bias in Indian society. This bias implies that women are inferior beings with little or no intellectual ability, and they are marginal to the serious concerns of life, and hence should not be taken seriously. She concluded that the Indian society looked at women as unable to stand on their own feet, but as objects owned by men.

Obododimma Oha focused on the semantics of female subjugation and derogation in Igbo proverbs. She found that the representations of womanhood in Igbo proverbs were mainly negative: women are typically portrayed as being stupid, morally debased, devilish, childish, and weak.

Jeylan Hussien examined the representation of women in Oromo folk-proverbs and folk-religion, and analysed the position of women in the traditional Oromo cultural practices. He concluded that gender ideology is created and reflected in multiple ways. Among the myriad ways, language and culture play a great role in creating and reflecting gendered culture in a society. The position of Oromo women was influential in the past but it has now declined

following the decline in the people's indigenous cultural practices. Oromo proverbs about womanhood were categorized into cultural stereotypes. Although the majority of the sample proverbs were basically disparaging, the semantics was shown to depend to a large extent on the complex whole of their context of use.

Maha Ennaji revealed that Moroccan proverbs about women embody many negative values which are passed from one generation to the next, and are reproduced in different ways. The negative force of the established value system is so deeply rooted that it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to eradicate. One of the conclusions of the study was that stereotypes about women are consistently repeated. These stereotypes reinforce the gender bias prevalent in the society which works to perpetuate women's inferior status in the social hierarchy. They are also based on certain interpretations of religious thinking and on a special construction of tales and superstitions whose common divider justifies the inferior standing of women in the social hierarchy and in the predominant values surrounding them.

Except for a number of articles in local magazines and newspapers, and anecdotal commentaries on the status of women in the Yemeni proverbs, there is no systematic academic study in a theoretical framework till now that addresses the social construction of the image of women in the traditional proverbs.

4. Data Collection

The proverbs about women were collected from two sources for this study. The researcher's systematic observation of occurrences of proverbs relating to women in natural normal everyday conversation provided the first source. Any proverb on women that was unheard before by the researcher was noted down. In fact, the researcher collected 11 proverbs in this way.

The second source from which data was collected was through an extensive review of the most well-known Yemeni encyclopaedias on proverbs (Al-Akwa' 2004), books on the proverbs of different Yemeni dialects (Dayyan & Qasem 1990; Al-Umary 1993; Al-Saqqaf 1997), and some of the local stories and newspaper articles written in any Yemeni dialect where proverbs about women have been mentioned. Only proverbs that directly mention women were gathered for the study. Those proverbs that only imply women were excluded. Out of the total number of 13758 proverbs reported in the sources mentioned, 150 proverbs on women have been identified by the researcher. Therefore, proverbs on women represent only 1 % of all the total number of the documented proverbs, which clearly implies the marginalized status of women in the cultural heritage (Al-Suraimy 570).

5. The Image of Women In The Yemeni Proverbs

The proverbs on women were studied from two angles: first, representation of women in general in terms of their personality, appearance, the way men treat them and the way they are mentioned and compared in some proverbs (in combination with livestock); and second, women's social roles in the society throughout their life.

5.1 Women In General

5.1.1 Personal Traits

Personal traits are the various characteristics that make up the personality of an individual, and are manifested in his/her behaviour. Women are thought particularly to be incapable of foresight, and unable to make and carry through sensible and realistic plans. They are described as foolish, stupid, and with no mind of their own as in the proverbs (1) and (2):

- (1) *ṣakl meiat mārā fī rāṣ nā ṣgā dawrā* (The minds of one hundred women are together equal to the mind of a foolish ewe.)
- (2) *ṣaklāhā fī dārmāhā* (Her mind is in her heel.)

Foolishness is the norm and if there is an intelligent or a wise woman, she is considered an exception as in the proverb:

- (3) *al ṣaqelā men ānnesā? kā ṣḡfaredāh men al eḥbel* (A wise woman is like a camel that goes astray from the flock.)

This conception is supported by false religious claims that women have only half of a mind (Al-Hashr 61). This misconception about the woman's mental capacity has led to men's stripping off the women's right of inheritance because women are believed to be incapable of effectively managing their inherited property:

- (4) *ānnesā? nāqeṣāṭ ṣakl wā de:n wā mi:rāṭ* (Women are deficient in intelligence, religion and inheritance.)

Therefore, as a result of this primordial understanding of the women's mental inferiority, it becomes extremely demoralizing for a man to be outwitted or deceived by a woman as in the proverb:

- (5) *dāwla tenhābak wālā mārā tesraqāk* (Better a state ripping you off than a woman stealing from you.)

The proverb reveals how utterly shameful would be the subjugation of men by women. It also points out a complex reaction caused by the violation of dominance-deference relationship between a man and a woman (Hussein 60). There is a cultural understanding that males should always dominate females. It reveals the reality of a patriarchal society in which the defeat of a

husband by his wife or a man by a woman is shameful to admit. Such instances mean that the man failed to meet the standard of masculinity (Turner & Schallert 323), and seem to jeopardize the man's dignity.

Women are also described as untrustworthy as in (6) and (7):

- (6) *lā teʔmān almārā wā lāw kən burhanha jēhji almagno:n* (Don't trust a woman even if she can cure the crazy).
 (7) *lā teʔmān alʔunΘā wā lāw kənət men alkasab* (Don't trust a female even if she is a she-goat.)

Women are also depicted as not worth getting acquainted with because they are valueless:

- (8) *mā šrefāt arregāl tegārā, wā mā šrefāt annesāʔ Xasārā* (To know a man is like doing business, but to know a woman is like losing business).

They are also depicted as liars:

- (9) *u šōr almārā tāht lesānhā* (The woman's excuse is under her tongue.),

They are evil and wicked:

- (10) *hawʔā Xarəggāt əʔdām men əlgənnā* (Eve got Adam out of Paradise.),

And because of their evil nature as stated in the proverb above, they are considered enemies of God:

- (11) *Xoð men əʔdāʔ əllāh waħedəh* (You should take (get married with) one of God's enemy.)

Due to their incapability to manage their own property as embedded in (11), they are considered extravagant:

- (12) *əlməkəlef tekkəlef* (Women are wasteful),

They are also malicious and sly as in (13) and (14):

- (13) *annesāʔ ħabāʔel əʔaitən* (women are snares of Satan).
 (14) *šəwr almārā səʔeb wə lāw beh məsəʔeb* (Women's opinions are right, though they are full of disasters.)

They are stubborn and headstrong:

- (15) *lā tekəber mārā wā lā tezəhem ħemar* (Don't argue with a woman nor pass by a donkey.);

They are treacherous and can collaborate with enemies:

- (16) *annesāʔ firəf ələ ʔidow* (Women are the mattress of enemy),

They are inherently weak and powerless:

- (17) *əlmərə mərə wə ləw tenəmərə* (A woman is a woman even if she becomes a tiger).

But though they are weak, they are sharp-tongued as in:

- (18) *seləh əlmərə lesənhə* (The weapon of the woman is her tongue),
and a trouble-maker:
- (19) *də ʕyət əlbələʔ əl ʕuwəilə wə ənnesəʔ* (Those who cause disasters are children and women.)

They are selfish:

- (20) *əlmərə ləw təzwəgət wə məʕəhə baqi ʕəntoof tequl lə ərregəl qum men fo:q ʕənto:fi*
(If a woman gets married and she has a mattress, she won't let her husband use it.)

They are unreliable, and cannot be counted on:

- (21) *ja men ə ʕwlh bənət ʔrdək ʕələ əssajləh* (Whoever has girls, has no one to support him.)

They are reckless and can easily go wrong, which can result in sully the family's name:

- (22) *əlbənət mukəkəserət əddhho:r* (Girls are back breakers.)

It is obvious that all these proverbs are loaded with prejudice against women and endow women with only undesirable characteristics. Only three proverbs constituting (2%) of the total proverbs on women praise women:

- (23) *əlbait əlmərə* (The home is where woman is.)
- (24) *mə dəhr ʔilə mərə, wə mə kənz ʔilə ʕurə* (Corn alone is a treasure, woman alone is timeless.)
- (25) *ʕuffə wə lə mejət ʕeqn* ((A woman's) forelock is better than one hundred beards, i.e., one woman is better than one hundred men.)

However, it is obvious that these proverbs do not praise her character. At any rate, the proverbs that express disapproval of women are far more numerous than those that express approval.

5.1.2 Physical Traits

There is a strong emphasis on the external appearance and physical beauty of women whose heels indicate their beauty as the following proverb indicates:

- (26) *əlmələehə to ʕraf men ə ʔdrəməhə*. (The girl's beauty is recognized by her heels)

Beauty must be a priority in selecting the future wife and if the bride turns out to be ugly, her husband can return her:

- (27) *alXaibā margaṣḥā le aṣḥl āhā* (The ugly-looking woman should be returned to her family.), and it is a must to get married to a virgin as in the following proverb:
- (28) *Xajr albanāt bukurahā* (The most desirable women are those who are virgins).

This proverb reveals that a key to successful marriage in Yemeni society is to have a virgin wife, but no proverb expresses the right of a woman to demand a 'virgin bridegroom'. This indicates the overall prerogative of a husband over his wife. Thus, it, directly echoes the relation of dominance and subordination between husband and wife in a patriarchal society (Hussien 61).

Women also should be able-bodied enough to fulfil all her husband's demands and carry out the essential chores of the house.

- (29) *zawgek jeḥebek lā anti qawjā wā aṣḥlek jeḥbonek lā anti ʔanejā* (Your husband will love you only if you are able-bodied, and you family will love you only if you are rich, i.e., keep giving them presents.)

The inner beauty of a woman and her character are ignored. Outward appearance is set against 'inner beauty'. Women are not chosen to be wives for who they are but for their beauty and appearance, and their family's reputation:

- (30) *banāt uṣṣo:l Xair men almal wā almāḥšo:l* (The daughters of reputable families are better than money and crops).

The reputation of the girl's family is even more important than her beauty:

- (31) *iṣḍā nāqas Xadāhā jewāfi:hā geddāhā* (If she isn't beautiful, (the reputation of) the grandfather will make up for it.)

This evidence suggests the tendency in Yemeni society to emphasize the good family. Perhaps a woman from a good family will stand by her husband in hard times. Still, judging a woman by her appearance or her family name relegates her to a mere physical creature rather than a thinking human being.

5.1.3 Violence Against Women

Domestic violence is used by men because they consider women as objects and assets (Hussien 67). Through beating, the man in the house seeks to maintain total control over their property. Authoritative manly behavior ought to serve as a preventive measure against female subversion (Schipper 261). It is also believed that the practice of violence is profitable to the man himself: "His wife will be sweeter, chaster, work harder, and thus his

own life is improved. Being beaten will turn her into a good wife; a better wife; a quieter wife; a tamed wife” (Schipper 262): The proverbs from (32) through (34) empower men to batter their wives or daughters:

- (32) *mə əʃʃeed iʔlə mə ɖobibə wə lə mərə iʔlə mə ɖorebə* (A porridge isn’t tasty unless it is well-cooked, and a woman isn’t a woman unless she is beaten.)
- (33) *əlgəwr ʔumə əlgəwr ʃələ əzzəwgə wə əlhemər wə əʔəwr* (Oppress and oppress your wife, your donkey, and your ox).
- (34) *dok albent daka kadakuk asanfi law jebqa e ʃrq jakfi* (Smash girls so hard as if you smash *sanaf* (a name of a plant) till you let only one vein work.)

The proverbs that degrade women implicitly valorize masculine power. That is, they encode Yemeni society’s belief that women are mere men’s chattel- that is, a piece of their property. Husbands and fathers can use force to exert dominance on their wives or daughters as if women have no dignity or character.

The abuse is not restricted to the physical side but also extends to the emotional, verbal and psychological side as well:

- (35) *əʔwəl əllail jə muqləti wə əʔXər əllail jə nuqrəti* (When night comes tell her that she is your eyes, and when it ends tell her that she is trash); and:
- (36) *lə teʃnəʃ əlməʃruf məʃ mərə* (Never do good to a woman.)

Violence can also be mental as in:

- (37) *qerəjət əlmərə meʔl ʃabo:n əlɖərə* (Women’s education is like a melting soap).

This proverb condemns female education as valueless. It is estimated that 79% of Yemeni women are illiterate¹. This high rate can be due to many factors but the proverb suggests that the role of the socio-cultural beliefs plays a major part. This proverb strips off the right of a woman to receive education and reveals the male mindset in society. A woman without learning or knowledge, from a male perspective, will be more devoted to housekeeping. Moreover, lack of knowledge brings more chances of their being submissive, modest and more easily controlled (Schipper 233).

Therefore, education should be restricted to men so that they can exercise their power over women and limit their personal freedom which may

1 Women National Committee report for 2008 on the status of women -Yemen.

liberate women from male authority.

These proverbs which call for violence against women aim at depriving women of their self-worth and independence, which tend to impact negatively on their ability to contribute to the well-being of the society. This in its turn is likely to inhibit the meaningful growth and development of a society which women constitute its half.

5.1.4 The Way Women Are Compared In Some Proverbs:

12 proverbs, accounting for 8% of the Yemeni proverbs, combine or compare women to children and livestock, for example:

- (38) *də ʕyət əlbələ? əl ʕuwailə wə ənnəsə?* (Those who cause disasters are children and women).
- (39) *lə te ʔmən əl ʔun ʔə wə ləw kənət men əlkəsəb* (Don't trust a female even if she is a she-goat),
- (40) *lə təsurək bənət əl ʕid wə lə dəwəb əl Xəjr* (Don't get tempted with the looks of the girls on Eid, nor the donkeys of the harvest seasons).
- (41) *i ʔbn i ʔbnək lək, i ʔbn bentək lə?, ləhm əlkəlb ʔjua ʔkəl, ləhm əlkəb ʔ lə ʕ* (The son of your son is yours, but the son of your daughter is not, because the flesh of sheep can be eaten, but not the flesh of dog.)

Even when a woman is praised, she is compared to an animal:

- (42) *mərə muddəberə Xəir men dəmd ə ʔsməri* (A woman who is a good housekeeper is better than an Eritrean sheep).

This juxtaposition of women with livestock or children indicate the abject level of distorted perception about the status of the woman in society as if she is at the same level with them. This analogy is denigrating, since it echoes society's view that women are "objects lacking full human subjectivity" (Collins 40).

5.2 Women's Roles Throughout Their lives

Yemeni proverbs portray women in different social roles and at different stages of their lives.

5.2.1 As A Newborn

In a culture that idolizes men and dreads the birth of a daughter, to be born female comes perilously close to being born less than human. The lifetime discrimination that she will be subjected to starts at birth. Proverbs on female newborns portray fathers as extremely angry and disgraced with the birth of a female child into their family. The proverb states:

- (43) *he teddi bənət wə i ʔhnə neXlef le kəsəb* (She gives birth to girls, and we will slaughter a she-goat in her honor.)

On the birth of a baby, a sheep should be slaughtered, but according to this proverb a she-goat, not a sheep, should be slaughtered for a girl. Girls are believed to bring dishonor and shame along with them according to the proverbs:

- (44) *almakalef ðumr* (Women are a disgrace).
 (45) *ʔin mat aXok jəkəsɾ dəhrək, wə ʔin matət uXtək jensətər šardək* (If your brother dies, your back will break, and if your sister dies, your honour will be protected.)

People may not like girls in the family because an illusory fear of poverty and shame weighs heavily on them. This fear has been inherited down the ages when fathers were in dire need for male children to guard themselves against their enemies, and to help them on their lands as well.

5.2.2 As A Daughter

At this age, females are considered to be in a transitional stage. They are considered as burdens on their fathers:

- (46) *aʔXas alXəbajə əššuf wə əššəbajə* (The worst hidden things are wools and girls of the marriageable age). She should be treated as a slave:
 (47) *al bent šəbd məmlo:k həttə ttəzəwəg* (A girl is a slave till she gets married).

Therefore, one of the most nagging concerns for the parents who have daughters is how to guarantee them husbands (Al-Adeemi 39). Daughters should be married at the earliest. The following proverb illustrates this tradition:

- (48) *zəweg bent aθθəman wə šelijə əddəman* (Get the eight-year-old girl married with my guarantee.)

It is estimated that 65% of Yemeni girls get married under 15 years old². Getting married will protect girls' honor, and control their behavior. The natural place for a woman is her husband's house. If she passes the marriage age, she is considered a spinster:

- (49) *məXto:bə wə lə nəberə* (Better be engaged than become a spinster).- Because:
 (50) *əlmərə belə wəli meθl bəb əlmənəq* (A woman without a husband is like the door of (a traditional) oven, i.e., useless).

2 Women National Committee report on the status of women-Yemen- 2008.

There is no choice before a woman but to get married:

(51) *azzəwag wə lə əlqəbr* (Get married, or get buried).

And it is better for her to get married to a pestering and annoying husband than go without a husband:

(52) *əzzowg əlmunəqem wə lə əlwehda* (Better get married to a nagging man than staying without a husband).

It is remarkable that the dignity of a woman and the respect of the society for her are conditioned by her legal relationship with a man under marriage institution (Afarfar 67). Becoming somebody's wife, then, means being (economically and socially) protected as well as being controlled by a husband (Schipper 103).

This attitude articulates society's view of a woman as emotionally, physically, and socially dependent on a man. It also assigns a woman one main role in the society i.e., to keep the procreating process going which entails women's unfitness to assume other important roles in society.

5.2.3 As A Wife

Although girls are not welcomed at their birth, they are considered the pillar of the house once they are wives. The proverbs acknowledge the importance of the woman in her house as the homemaker. No home goes without a woman as the following proverb states:

(53) *əlbait əlmərə* (The home is where women is.)

Besides, a man would rather get sick than see his wife getting sick since life in the house cannot go without her:

(54) *əmrəd ənə wə lə temrəd əlmərə* (I'd better get sick than see my wife getting sick).

But the man should not outwardly appreciate her efforts and skills in managing the house

(55) *əlmərə serəg əlbait wə lə tezəmeri ləhə* (Women are the light of the house, but you shouldn't tell her this).

It is the woman who will bring fortune to her house and however the man is wealthy, it means nothing without a good house keeper:

(56) *mərə muddəberə wə lə tegərə men ʕədən* (A good housekeeper is better than a business from Aden).

A woman should be a good house keeper but not rich. Being wealthy will empower the woman, and hence will prevent the man from dominating her (Al-Marneesi 23). Furthermore, a wealthy bride will have more say in the relationship (Schipper 93).

However, even though she is at the core of the family life, her activities should be restricted to running the household effectively, and not to be permitted to exceed this role to exercise her partnership with her husband. If the husband takes his wife's opinion, he will be considered weak and not manly enough:

- (57) *men astaməṣ ḁlmərə kən mərəṭ ḁlmərə* (Whoever listens to his wife is considered a wife of his wife.)

He will not only be stripped off of his manhood but also should be punished severely

- (58) *muser mərəṭu ḥələqu ḁiqnu men uṛḁnu lə uṛḁnu* (Whoever confides in his wife, his beard should be plucked from one ear to the other.), and it is highly unmanly behavior to spend much time at home because:

- (59) *əṛḫəs ḁlmətəreḥ ḁlbəit* (The worst places are homes).

5.2.4 As A Mother

It is the mother's intrinsic role to provide her children with the inner sense of security when satisfying their physical and emotional needs. This role continues even when the children become grown-ups:

- (60) *men əṣḁ uṛmuh lə tehemuh* (Whoever has his mother alive has no worries).

That is, the mother will make sure that everything is taken care of:

- (61) *men əṣḁ uṛmuh beddær əṣḁ quršu ḥær* (Whoever has his mother at home will eat his bread hot).

Although mothers at home take on the responsibility of rearing their children, only the daughters will be like them and the sons will be like their fathers:

- (62) *əlbent leṛuməḥə wə ḁlwələḁ lə əṛbuh* (Daughters are for their mothers and sons for their fathers).

She can only bring her daughter up in a way similar to her:

- (63) *iṛqṭuif ḁlwərdə wə fumeh wə ḁbuniə ṛələ uṛmeh* (Pluck basil and smell it, and the daughter will resemble her mother).

The point that daughters behave the way their mothers do is mainly made from the perspective of a man who wants to marry. His perspective and his interest "are at stake depending on whether the daughter of a 'good' mother is to be a good wife" (Schipper 136)

5.2.5 As A Widow

According to the proverbs, a widow is not seen fully qualified to turn a son into a man. If the mother is a widow, her son will be disgraced as

(64) *iʔbn uʔmuh* (His mother's son), or

(65) *iʔbn məkłəf* (A woman's son).

He will be deemed as half a man

(66) *iʔbn məkłəf nos reggæl* (A son who is raised by a widow is half a man), or

(67) *iʔbn mərmələ nəqes əθulθ* (The son of a widow is third competent as ordinary ones.)

5.2.6 Other Roles

Other roles of women which constitute (3.9 %) of the proverbs on women are all seen as ill-natured and evil. The proverbs (68) through (71) illustrate these:

(68) *genni bein əttebn wə lə mərət əliʔbn* (A Jinni hidden in hay is better than a daughter-in-law.); as a sister in law

(69) *genni əfləX wə lə mərət ələX* (A deformed Jinni is better than a sister-in-law.), a step mother

(70) *qəd əttəbinə təbinə wə ləw kanət men əlʕəgine* (A step mother will be a step mother even if she is a dough (i.e., whatever kind of work she does); as mother-in-law:

(71) *lə ttezwəg wə əʕd qurquf uʔmək be tæqə* (Don't get married while your mother is still alive) because she will be a bad mother-in-law for your wife (Al-Akwa).

For a broader picture of the image of women in the society, it is of essence to have a brief look at the other side- that is, the image of the man in the Yemeni society as reflected in the proverbs.

6. The Image of Men

Proverbs that directly refer to men or describe them from the vantage point of their being males are even fewer than those that refer to women. However, all of them praise males, and not a single proverb that was found in this research belittle them. All the proverbs about men embody a society's belief that men are superior creatures. Man is the basis from whom the woman was created.

(72) *ħæw ʔə Xlekət men ʔel ʕə ʔdām* (Eve was created from Adam's rib)

In the traditional Yemeni family, sons are more permanent members of the family, and are the ones who would ultimately inherit the legacy of their family, while females are destined to go out of the lineage through marriage. It suggests a general Arabic cultural belief that a newly born baby son is the bearer of the family name in general, and the extension of the father's masculinity, in particular (Oha 92). Sons are considered the prime source of economic and physical support.

The proverbs state:

(73) *ħejj le əlwələd mənəin mə ɡə* (Welcome the boy no matter from where he came.)

Moreover, society turns a blind eye to whatever a man does because:

(74) *ərrəɡəl ħamel ʕeibu* (Nothing disgraces a man.)

This attitude of society towards males indicates the feeling of supremacy of men in the society, and also inspires men to develop a belief that they are mentally, physically and spiritually superior to women. Therefore, there is a big difference in the expectations assigned to both sexes in the society with women as a disgrace in themselves, and with men having full power to violate even the ethical and moral principles in the name of manhood.

7. The Society's Perception Of Women As Depicted In The Proverbs

In order to investigate the contemporary perception of people in the society as regards the image of women reflected in the proverbs, the author designed a questionnaire consisting of 20 Yemeni proverbs on women, and two proverbs on the dignified status of men. The two groups of proverbs were assigned separate sections (See Appendix 1). In selecting the proverbs for the questionnaire, the author attempted to obtain a representative sampling from the various categories discussed above. Each category is represented by one proverb except for the category of personal traits which is represented by 10 proverbs, as the majority of the proverbs on women come under this category. The categories are: physical and personal traits of women: foolish, untrustworthy, liar, trouble-maker, weak, malicious, incompetent, valueless, wicked, and dependency of women on men; encouraging violence against women; social roles played by women throughout their lives, dependency of women on men,

One proverb that values and exalts women constitutes one category by itself.

Respondents were asked to choose whether they believed each proverb was applicable or inapplicable to Yemeni women (Section A), and Yemeni men (Section B). The questionnaire was written in Arabic.

The questionnaire was administered to 100 students chosen using the cluster sampling method: 50 males and 50 females. All of the participants were undergraduate students at Taiz University.

8. Results and Analysis

This section presents the results of the questionnaire on the gender differences in the perceived image of the woman in the Yemeni society as reflected in the Yemeni traditional proverbs:

Personal and Physical Traits

There is no significant difference between female and male respondents in their attitudes towards the way the society looks at women for almost all the negative traits as shown in Table 1. Both males and females respondents agreed on the negative traits attributed to women with varying degrees. According to 80% of the male respondents, women are trouble-makers, and incompetent. 84% of the male respondents thought that women are liars and 74% believed that they are untrustworthy and wicked. Over half of the male respondents (54%) believed that women are malicious, while 70% believed they are foolish. The majority of males wanted a beautiful woman (98%). Females participants in the questionnaire, on the other hand, perceived themselves negatively- all the traits yielded no less than 50% agreement on the applicability of the proverbs to women except for foolishness and untrustworthiness (28% and 40%, respectively), which are still a high rate. Almost half of the females believed that Yemeni women are incompetent, wicked and malicious. 82% of the Yemeni female respondents thought that Yemeni women are sharp-tongued, 66% of them maintained that women are liars, and 68% of them believed that women are trouble-makers. Female respondents, more than their counterparts, thought that Yemeni women are valueless (86 % versus 78%). Both male and female respondents agreed that women are weak (98% and 96%, respectively). Weakness seems stereotypical of women. Female respondents, also, stressed the outer beauty of the woman (92%), and unexpectedly gave the man the right to return his wife if she is not good-looking (92%). 84 % of the male respondents hold that a woman is better off

even with a nagging husband than without any husband at all. Interestingly, 68% of female respondents agreed with this view.

Table 1. The Attitudes Of Male and Female Respondents Towards The Personal And Physical Traits Of Women In The Yemeni Proverbs

	(%) Males	(%) Females
Foolish	70	28
Untrustworthy	74	40
Liar	84	66
Trouble-maker	80	68
Weak	98	96
Malicious	54	54
Sharp-tongued	86	82
Incompetent	80	50
Valueless	78	86
Wicked	74	54
Dependency of women on men	84	68

Violence against women

The results presented in Table 2 were surprising. More than half of the male respondents (56%) approved of the proverbs that encourage physical violence against women, while 84% of the female respondents rejected the idea of being battered.

The proverbs truly reflect the masculine ego and perpetuate the assumed rights of rigidly stereotyped men to cause physical and psychological harm to their female partners (Disch 394) with the blessings of the society.

Table 2. The Attitude Of Male And Female Respondents Towards Encouraging Violence Against Women In The Yemeni Proverbs

	(%) Males	(%) Females
Encouraging domestic violence	56	16

Women's Roles

Table 3 shows the difference in the attitudes of the male and female respondents with regard to the role of the Yemeni women in the society. Newborn female children are welcomed neither by males, nor by females of the family, with 82% of female respondents more apprehensive of giving birth to a female child compared to 68% of the male respondents who tended to

show similar apprehensions on the issue. This attitude of women can be accounted for by the desire to make their husbands happy by giving birth to sons in order to perpetuate their father's name. A son in any family guarantees the peace and happiness of the family. Husbands have been known married to another woman for the sake of getting a son. Therefore, female respondents included in the questionnaire were identifying with women in the society and, thus, adopted this attitude. However, except for the role of a woman as a daughter, the difference between the responses between male and female respondents with regard to women's roles is not big. Both agreed on the negative role of the wife in the house (46% for females vs. 68% for males). Both male and female respondents also cast doubt on the competence and ability of a widow to raise a family (76% and 66% respectively). Female respondents believed in the evil nature of all the in-laws, more than men did (88% vs. 78%, respectively).

Table 3. The Attitudes of Males and Female Respondents Towards The Roles Of Women Throughout Their Life As Manifested In The Yemeni Proverbs

	(%) Males	(%) Females
Newborn	68	82
Daughter	74	27
Wife	68	46
Mother	88	96
Widow	76	66
Other roles	78	88

Praising women

Both male and female respondents (96%, and 94 %, respectively) believed that the institution of families is firmly based on women and those institutions without women are inconceivable.

Glorifying man

As expected, the sweeping majority of male respondents (94%) agreed that there is nothing that a man does that he can be ashamed of. Only 45% of females agreed with this assumption.

8. Conclusion and Implications

The image of women in Yemeni proverbs has two facets: the negative side which occupies the major part, and the positive one which is marginal

and extremely weak. It was found that almost all proverbs degrade and demean women nearly in all of their age and roles. Almost every proverb that relates to women contains a severe negation of the value of women in society. The examples presented here are just a sample of tens of existing negative proverbs about women.

Out of all the proverbs studied, the author could only find three proverbs that exalt women. However, even when a woman is mentioned in a positive way, it is rare to find any other positive qualities except those that are related to her body and her "natural roles". Her positive evaluation is derived from her body, beauty, ability to give birth to children, care for her family, and skill in manual and domestic work. These examples amply show that the proverbs of the past centuries express misogyny, pure and simple (cf. Mieder 53). This claim is further supported by the Yemeni proverb which says *almara seræg albait wə lə tezmri ləhə* (even if a woman does a good thing, you should not tell her that). These verbal assaults on women may lead us to reconsider proverbs as 'wisdom' sayings. They are clearly faulty generalizations and could have originated as one man's illogical conclusions, which other people, with gender prejudices, have come to accept as aphorisms. If some women have been unreliable and unfaithful, to say that (all) women are unreliable and unfaithful is nonsensical (Oha 94).

The proverbs encode cultural beliefs which define what it means to be a prototypical man or woman and suggest how each should behave in the society (cf. Hussien 135). Therefore, both men and women are placed in typical social positions and assigned patterns of expectations. These proverbs, thus, are used as grounds to justify different sets of rights and responsibilities for each gender. Domestic violence is, thus, legitimized- the man will not feel remorse about beating his wife because the society has issued him a license to use his authority over women to perpetuate the latter's subordination and subservience. The rate of domestic violence in Yemen has reportedly reached 56.4%³ even though many cases are not reported due to the prevailing traditions that constrain women from complaining against their husbands and fathers. And one of the reasons identified for domestic violence is the prevalence of the inherited patterns of prejudices against women, and the high level of tolerance of aggressive male behaviour at home.

The result is a sexist mindset that has the potential to affect practically every aspect of women's lives, preventing them from accomplishing their full potential. Discrimination against females is a stark reality that affects large

3 Women National Committee report for 2008 on the status of women-Yemen.

portions of the society. It actually reflects the society's aspiration for control and this is where the proverbs help patriarchy to live on from generation to generation by presenting it as a stable immutable part of social order (Ssetuba).

However, we can say that although the female respondents are educated university women, they are still under the influence of tradition and false beliefs about status of women. Admittedly, the majority of women in Yemeni society are illiterate and economically dependent on men, hence they may seem to unwittingly acquiesce in the stereotypical denunciation of women through their socializing job at home. Women may internalize the negative attitudes held against them and convince themselves that they are really incapable of doing worthwhile things. Mary Devereaux has argued that in a male-dominated society, women "Judge themselves according to internalized standards of what is pleasing to men" (337). Their role is to guard, nurture and sustain the existing cultural values and norms embedded in all forms of oral traditions. They unconsciously buy into negative images that can trigger abuse and mistreatment of other women. They do not realize that their behavior reflects society's biases (Chesler 2009). The result is oppressed humiliated women.

The relationship between men and women in Yemeni society should be assessed not on gender basis but on their roles and values as human beings. Gender discrimination has to be resisted wherever it exists. This can be achieved by widespread education, creating opportunities to increase economic independence of women, revisiting the school curriculum and eradicating discriminatory images and concepts, enforcing the law, and strengthening the role of civil organizations that are concerned with women's issues. It can also be done at the level of language which can partly be held responsible for perpetuating women's oppression and is used among other things to create and reinforce gender ideology because groups who occupy a subordinate or oppressed position in society invariably suffer from linguistic disparagement (Leith 147). It may take a very long time to change mentalities but eventually efforts to promote mass awareness of the rights and privileges among women will pay off.

References

- Afarfar, Ali. *Surat al-Maraa bein al-Mandhoor ad-Deini wa as-Shabi wa al-Almani* (The Image of the Woman from Religious, Traditional and Secular Perspectives). Beirut: Attaleaa House, 1996.
- Al-Adeemi, Mohammed. *aththarwa alyamaneiya men alamthal alshabeiya* (The Yemeni treasure of traditional proverbs). Beirut: Fuaad beainu Establishment, 1989.

- Al-Akwa', Ismail bin Ali. *Al-Amthal al-Yamaniya* (The Yemeni Proverbs). 2 vols. Sanaa: The Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2004.
- Al-Ali, Fatima. "Al-Maraa fi al-Mathurat ash-Shabiyal al-Kuwaitayia" (Woman in the Kuwaiti Oral Tradition). *Al-Bayan Journal* 355 (2000): 24-32.
- Al-Hashr, Abdulaziz. *Waraa Aswar al-Haramlak* (Beyond the Fences of Haramlak). Arab House for Sciences, 2007.
- Al-Marneesi, Fatima. *al-Hareem Assiyasi: Annesa wa Annabi* (The Political Women: Women and the Prophet). Al-Hasad House, 1987.
- *Shahrazad Tarhal ila al-Gharb* (Shahrazad Leaves for the West). Beirut: The Arabic Cultural Center- Al-Fanak-Addar Albaidha, 2003.
- Al-Saqqaf, Ahmed. *Hekam wa Amthal Shabiya men al-Manteqa al-Sharqiya* (Wisdom Sayings and Traditional Proverbs from the Eastern Parts). Sanaa: Books General Authority, 1997.
- Al-Suraimy, Sultan. "Al-Maraa fi al-Mthal as-Shabiya al-Yamaniya" (Woman in the Traditional Yemeni proverbs). *Al-Afeef Annuals* 4(2004): 569-578.
- Al-Umary, Ali. *Al-Lahja at-Tahamiya fi al-Lahja al-Yamaniya* (The Tehamyan Dialect in the Yemeni Dialect). Sanaa: Yemen House of Printing and Publishing, 1993.
- Chessler, Phyllis. *Woman's Inhumanity to Woman*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2009.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. "Learning From the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought." *Multicultural Experiences, Multicultural Theories*. Ed. Mary F. Rogers and George Ritzer. New York: The McGraw-Hill, 1996. 35-58.
- Dayyan, Mohammed and Ali Qasem. *Men al-Amthela al-Shabiya al-Yamaniya be MantaqatYafa' (From the Traditional Proverbs in Yafa')*. Aden: House of Press and Publication, 1992.
- Devereaux, Mary. "Oppressive Texts, Resisting Readers and the Gendered Spectator: The New Aesthetics." *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 48.4 (1990): 337-347.
- Devi, Basanti. "Women in the Mirror of Indian Languages." *Language in India: Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow* 3 Jan. 2003: 1-12.
- Disch, Estelle. *Reconstructing Gender: A Multicultural Anthology*. California: Mayfield Publishing, 1997.
- Ennaji, Moha. "Representations of Women in Moroccan Arabic and Berber

Proverbs." *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 190 (2008): 167-181.

Fasiku, Gbenga. "Yorùb Proverbs, Names and National Consciousness." *The Journal of Pan African Studies* 1.4 (2006): 33-56.

Grzybek, Peter. "Foundations of Semiotic Proverb Study." *Wise Words: Essays on the Proverb*. Ed. Wolfgang Mieder. New York: Garland, 1994: 31-71.

Hahn, Dan F. *Political Communication: Rhetoric, Government and Citizens*. Strata Publishing, 1998.

Harris, Marvin. *Cultural Anthropology*. 4th ed. New York: Harper Collins College Publishers, 1995.

Holmes, Janet. *Women, Men and Politeness*. London: Longman, 1995.

Hussein, Jeylan W. "A Cultural Representation of Women in the Oromo Society". *African Study Monographs* 25.3 (2004): 103-147.

..... "The Social and Ethno-cultural Construction of Masculinity and Femininity in African Proverbs". *African Study Monographs* 26.2 (2005): 59-87.

Kramsch, Claire. "Rhetorical Models of Understanding." T. Miller(ed.) *Functional Approach to Written Text: Classroom Applications*. Ed. T. Miller. Washington: United States Information Agency, 1997. 50-63.

Lakoff, Robin. *Language and Women's Place*. New York: Harper and Row, 1975.

Leith, Dick. "The Vocabulary of Power, Rank and Status." *Language, Communication and Education*. Ed. B.M. Mayor and K. Pugh. London & Sydney: Croom Helm, 1987. 147-152.

Lorber, Judith. "Believing is Seeing: Biology as Ideology." *Multicultural Experiences, Multicultural Theories*. Ed. Mary F. Rogers. New York: The McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc, 1996. 186-197.

Mieder, Wolfgang. *Proverbs: A HandBook*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 2004.

Oha, Obododimma. "The Semantics of Female Devaluation in Igbo Proverbs." *African Study Monographs* 19.2 (1998): 87-102.

Schipper, Mineke. *Never Marry a Woman With Big Feet: Women in Proverbs from Around the World*. Amsterdam University Press, 2006.

Ssetuba, Isaac. "The Hold of Patriarchy: An Appraisal of the Ganda Proverb in the Light of Modern Gender Relations." *Cairo Gender Symposium*, 2002. Cairo, 28-45.

- Storm, Hiroko. "Women in Japanese Proverbs." *Asian Folklore Studies* 51.2 (1992): 67-182.
- Turner, Jeannine E. and Diane L. Schallert. "Expectancy-Value Relationships of Shame Reactions and Shame Resiliency." *Journal of Educational Psychology* 93.2 (2001): 320-329.

* * *

Appendix (1)

استبيان

عزيزي الطالب/ عزيزتي الطالبة

الرجاء ملء الاستبيان التالي علماً بأن المعلومات ستستخدم لأغراض البحث العلمي وضع علامة (أمام المثلث الشعبي الذي تعتقد بأنه يعبر عن ما تؤمن به.

ذكر: انثى:

اقرأ الأمثلة اليمينية الشعبية التالية و ضع علامة (✓) في الخانة التي تتفق مع رأيك:
أ- أمثال عن المرأة

لا ينطبق على المرأة	ينطبق على المرأة	
		١- ما عصيد إلا ماضبيه، و ما مره إلا ما ضربه
		٢- الخيبة مرجعها لأهلها
		٣- لا صاححت المرة غرت على الرجال
		٤- عقل المرأة في درمها
		٥- لا تأمن الأنثى و لو كان برهانها يحيي المجنون.
		٦- هي تدي بنات و إحنا نخلف له بكسب
		٧- من عمل بمشورة مرته ندم
		٨- داعية البلاء العويلة (الجهال) و النساء
		٩- ابن مكلف نص رجال
		١٠- معرفة الرجال تجارة و معرفة النساء خسارة
		١١- البنت عبد مملوك حتى تتزوج
		١٢- الزوج المناقم ولا الوحدة
		١٣- البيت المرة و الحب الذرة
		١٤- جني بين التبن و لا مرة الابن
		١٥- من عاد أمه لا تهمة
		١٦- المرة مرة ولو تنمره

تابع / أ- أمثال عن المرأة

لا ينطبق على المرأة	ينطبق على المرأة	
		١٧- النساء ناقصات عقل و دين و ميراث
		١٨- سلاح المرأة لسانها
		١٩- النساء حبائل الشيطان
		٢٠- حواء خرجت ادم من الجنة

ب- أمثال عن الرجل

لا ينطبق على الرجل	ينطبق على الرجل	
		١- حي للولد منين ما جاء
		٢- الرجل حامل عييه

Translation of the questionnaire

Questionnaire

Dear participants:

The information elicited from the following questionnaire will only be used for research purposes. Put a tick (✓) in the box against the proverb you think expresses what you believe .

Male:

Female:

A- Proverbs about women

	Applicable to a woman	Inapplicable to a woman
1- A porridge isn't tasty unless it is well-cooked, and a woman isn't a woman unless she is beaten.		
2- The ugly-looking woman should be returned to her family.		
3- If a woman shouts for help, run to rescue the man.		
4- The mind of the woman is in her foot.		
5- Don't trust women even if she can cure the crazy.		
6- She gives birth to girls, and we will slaughter a goat in her honor.		
7- Whoever acts according to the advice of his wife will regret.		
8- Those who cause disasters are children and women.		
9- A son who is raised by a widow is half a man		
10- To know a man is like doing business, but to know a woman is like losing business		
11- A girl is a salve till she gets married		
12- A nagging husband is better than loneliness.		
13- The home is where women is, and the corn is the core of cereals.		

Cont. A- Proverbs about women

	Applicable to a woman	Inapplicable to a woman
14- A Jinni hidden in hay is better than a daughter-in-law.		
15- Whoever has his mother alive, don't get worried about him.		
16- A woman is a woman even if she becomes a tiger.		
17- Women are deficient in intelligence, religion and inheritance.		
18- The weapon of the woman is her tongue		
19- Women are snares of Satan.		
20- Eve got Adam out of the Paradise		

B- Proverbs about men

	Applicable to the man	Inapplicable to the man
1- Welcome the son no matter from where he came		
2- Nothing disgraces a man		

Appendix (2) (The Phonetic Symbols Used In The Text)

Consonants:

	Bilabial	Labio-dental	Dental	Alveolar	Post-alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Uvular	Pharyngeal	Glottal stop
Plosive	b (ب)		t (ت) d (د)				k (ك) g (ج)	q (ق)		(أ)?
Nasal	m (م)		n (ن)							
Fricative		f (ف)	θ (ث) ð (ذ)	s (س) z (ز)	ʃ (ش)		X (خ) ɣ (غ)		ħ (ح)	h (ه)
Affricate										
Trill				r (ر)						
Approximant						j (ي)	w (و)			
Lateral Approximant					l (ل)					

Pharyngealized consonants: ʕ (ع) ʕ (ص) ɗ (ظ) ɗ (ط)

Vowels:

u High back short rounded vowel

ə Central unrounded vowel just below the mid-low position

æ Low front unrounded vowel

e Mid-high front unrounded vowel

i: High front unrounded vowel

o: Mid-low back long rounded vowel

ai A glide from low front unrounded vowel to a high front unrounded vowel

- * I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their valuable and thorough review which definitely made the paper better.
