

# 'Tainted Pearls of Wisdom'. A thematic analysis of the representation of women in Egyptian proverbs

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## Abstract

This article discusses the representation of women in Colloquial Egyptian proverbs (CEPs). Even though myriad studies have tackled the image of women in many linguistic genres, this is the first study to discursively examine such portrayal in Egyptian proverbs. Proverbs are usually laden with a moral legacy so instructive that it can steer the rudder of social ideologies. In patriarchal societies, however, sexist proverbs represent women negatively and sediment their submissiveness. The aim of this paper is to explore the major themes in the representation of women in CEPs. To this end, we conducted a thematic analysis of the data from a feminist critical discourse analysis perspective, employing Glick and Fiske's (2001) Ambivalent Sexism Inventory with its two types of sexism, *hostile sexism* and *benevolent sexism*. The data revealed six major themes and 17 subthemes, all exhibiting either *hostile* or *benevolent* sexist depictions of women. The data showed that the CEPs were mostly designed to enforce male supremacy over women. Women were portrayed as a source of shame if they did not obey the rules of patriarchal society. While women were objectified and commodified, superficially valuing women for their stereotyped female attributes of domesticity and nurturing of their children, women's worth is depicted as conditional upon men's evaluation.

**Keywords:** Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis; representation of women; Egyptian Colloquial proverbs; hostile sexism; benevolent sexism

**Resum.** *«Perles contaminades de saviesa». Una anàlisi temàtica de la representació de les dones en els proverbis egipcis*

Aquest article discuteix la representació de les dones en els proverbis col·loquials egipcis (PCE). Encara que nombrosos estudis han abordat la imatge de les dones en molts gèneres lingüístics, aquest és el primer estudi que examina discursivament tal representació en els proverbis egipcis. Els proverbis solen estar carregats d'un llegat moral tan instructiu que pot dirigir el timó de les ideologies socials. No obstant això, en les societats patriarcal, els proverbis sexistes representen les dones negativament i sedimenten la seva submissió. L'objectiu d'aquest article és explorar els temes principals en la representació de les dones en els PCE. Per fer-ho, realitzem una anàlisi temàtica de les dades des d'una perspectiva d'anàlisi crítica del discurs feminista, emprant l'Inventari de Sexisme Ambivalent de Glick i Fiske (2001) amb els seus dos tipus de sexisme, el sexisme hostil i el sexisme benivolent. Les dades van revelar sis temes principals i disset subtemes, tots exhibint representacions sexistes hostils o benivolents de les dones. Les dades van mostrar que els PCE estaven dissenyats principalment per reforçar la supremacia masculina sobre les dones. Les dones eren retratades com una font de vergonya si no obeïen les regles de la societat patriarcal. Les dones eren objectivades i mercantilitzades, valorant-les superficialment pels seus atributs femenins estereotipats de domesticitat i criaça dels seus fills, i el seu valor es representa com a condicional a l'avaluació dels homes.

**Paraules clau:** anàlisi crítica del discurs feminista; representació de dones; proverbis col·loquials egipcis; sexisme hostil; sexisme benivolent

**Resumen.** *«Perlas contaminadas de sabiduría». Un análisis temático de la representación de las mujeres en los proverbios egipcios*

Este artículo discute la representación de las mujeres en los proverbios coloquiales egipcios (PCE). Aunque numerosos estudios han abordado la imagen de las mujeres en muchos géneros lingüísticos, este es el primer estudio que examina discursivamente tal representación en los proverbios egipcios. Los proverbios suelen estar cargados de un legado moral tan instructivo que puede dirigir el timón de las ideologías sociales. Sin embargo, en las sociedades patriarcales, los proverbios sexistas representan a las mujeres negativamente y sedimentan su sumisión. El objetivo de este artículo es explorar los temas principales en la representación de las mujeres en los PCE. Para ello, realizamos un análisis temático de los datos desde una perspectiva de análisis crítico del discurso feminista, empleando el Inventario de Sexismo Ambivalente de Glick y Fiske (2001) con sus dos tipos de sexismo, el sexismo hostil y el sexismo benevolente. Los datos revelaron seis temas principales y diecisiete subtemas, todos exhibiendo representaciones sexistas hostiles o benevolentes de las mujeres. Los datos mostraron que los PCE estaban diseñados principalmente para reforzar la supremacia masculina sobre las mujeres. Las mujeres eran retratadas como una fuente de vergüenza si no obedecían las reglas de la sociedad patriarcal. Las mujeres eran objetivadas y mercantilizadas, valorándolas superficialmente por sus atributos femeninos estereotipados de domesticidad y crianza de sus hijos, y su valor se representa como condicional a la evaluación de los hombres.

**Palabras clave:** análisis crítico del discurso feminista; representación de mujeres; proverbios coloquiales egipcios; sexismo hostil; sexismo benevolente

*Let him be told the speech of those who assess,  
the advice of the ancestors once heard by the gods.*

The Instructions of Ptahhotep

## 1. Introduction

Ptahhotep’s adage, dating back to c.2350 B.C., shows the high regard associated with words of wisdom – proverbs –, a view that is shared across time, place and culture. For the Chinese, proverbs are untainted pearls of wisdom, for the Germans, the wisdom of the ages that is not to be broken, and for the Arabs, truth and ultimate wisdom. Proverbs are not a type of discourse that should be flouted (Al-Jawziyyah, died 1350 A.D., in Al-Sahli, 2002), for they are laden with a moral legacy that instructs people and guides their conduct, showing them “what to do or what to think in a given situation” (Schipper, 2006: 17). They are the final word when a person is at a crossroads (Gadu, 1991), the fruit of the human mind constituting the right that cannot be refuted or denied (Al-Suyuti, died 1505 A.D., in Gad El-Moula, 1986).

Identities are socially constructed through language, and societies take for granted truths that are established via discourse (Foucault, 1990). This study attempts to challenge the ‘truth’ about gender roles, stereotypes and power relations in society by dissecting one of the cultural and discursive tools through which such ‘truths’ are established; namely, proverbs. It investigates the representation of women in Egyptian proverbs by discussing their major themes. Arguing that gender is “negotiated and contested through the production and circulation of discourse” (Leap, 2003: 402), we hope that by examining how women are (mis)represented in a discursive practice as pervasive and widely influential as proverbs, this may contribute to modifying the discursive and social practices latent in the concept of gender.

When a dominant group attempts to control other groups, it is essential for it to propagate its own ideologies. The power of such a dominant group is usually integrated in social norms and habits, among other things (van Dijk, 2001). These norms and habits are the product of certain ideologies that set stereotypes and determine what is acceptable, expected and normal. It is by propagating the normality of such ideologies and social practices that dominant groups maintain their hegemony over other groups (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Schlesinger, 2010). Thus, other groups not only accept such domination but find it natural and inevitable as well (Dyer, 1997). Domination is consequently established through consensus, not coercion (Grace, 2015). Such norms and ideologies are socially constructed as ‘truths’ through various discursive practices in a society, and it is these truths that must be challenged and changed (Foucault, 1990).

Gender is not a biological issue, but rather a social construct moulded through social practices. Ensnared in these practices, men tend to maintain

power and hegemony over women by using discourse to propagate the normality of such hegemony (Cornell, 1991). In patriarchal societies, gender ideologies are the product of what men as a dominant group propagate as the truth and reality. The term ‘ideologies’ was first used in connection with gender in a Marxist connotation; for just as the working class was dominated by the bourgeoisie, women are dominated by men, and the dominant view is the one that ensured such male domination (Philips, 2004). Such hegemony is realised through language (Cameron, 2005; Lakoff, 2003; Mills and Mullaney, 2011; Nayef and El-Nashar, 2014; Sunderland, 2006; Talbot, 2003). Not only does language reflect gender, but it constitutes and sediments it, producing sexism as a social reality.

Proverbs are one of the “cultural vehicles” through which men construct the female identity by propagating certain gender stereotypes (Chikwelu, 2017: ii). The use of proverbs can be regarded as an exercise of power by a dominant group in everyday life (van Dijk, 2001). Gender-related proverbs entail a stereotyping process that tends to include “a strategy of splitting” (Talbot, 2003: 471). This splitting process separates the normal and acceptable from the abnormal and unacceptable, leading to the social and cultural exclusion of the latter (Talbot, 2003). We concur with Hussein (2009) that “in asymmetrically structured societies, linguistic resources are systematically used to perpetuate inequality” (p. 96). The study of proverbs is, therefore, essential in gender and language studies, as they show how language is employed to define gender roles and identities. They pave “a royal road to the examination of inter-connection between ideology, stereotypes, language and power” (Lomotey and Chachu, 2020: 71).

## 2. Proverbs and the Egyptian culture

There is almost a consensus among scholars on the significant role played by proverbs in Egyptian society (Abdallah, 2014; Ezzat, 1997; Gadu, 1991; Shalaby, 1992). Proverbs are deeply rooted in Egyptian folk culture (Shalaan, 2010). They are the product of human experience and are the guide to humans in welfare and hardship (Ragheb, 1943). They are the voices of more experienced and much wiser men, and their validity is incontrovertible (Farrag and Anwar, 2008). In Egyptian society, they sometimes “have the power of a law, the legitimacy of the religious Sharia, can substitute legal contracts and resolve a dispute that has been going on for a long time” (Farrag and Anwar, 2008: 116). Proverbs are widely used by individuals from all social and economic classes (El-Masry, 1984; Ezzat, 1997). Their pervasive influence has reached the highest religious institution in Egypt, Al-Azhar, prompting it to issue a *fatwa* (i.e. religious opinion) validating the instruction enshrined in one proverb (Shalaan, 2010).

Gender representation in proverbs has drawn the attention of Arab scholars (Al-Isdawy, 2017; Fakkar, 2015; Ismail, 2012; Moqadim, 2017; Ramzy et al., 1992; Rasul, 2015). Notwithstanding the cornucopia of studies inves-

Investigating proverbs, there is little work done on gender representation in Egyptian proverbs, particularly from a linguistic perspective. To the best of our knowledge, there has not been a study that has tackled the linguistic representation of women in Egyptian proverbs. This is the gap this paper particularly seeks to fill. There are two main categories of Egyptian proverbs, distinguished according to the language variation used: Standard Classical Arabic proverbs and Colloquial Egyptian Arabic proverbs. It is the latter category which is the subject of our study.

### 3. Methodology and theoretical framework

This study investigates the representation of women in selected Colloquial Egyptian proverbs (CEPs). Adopting feminist critical discourse analysis as its theoretical framework, it employs Glick and Fiske’s (2001) Ambivalent Sexism Inventory, and conducts a thematic analysis of 385 proverbs to determine the major recurrent themes.

#### 3.1. *Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis*

Feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA) has been chosen as the theoretical framework to serve the purpose of this study. FCDA focuses on describing and critiquing gender-related discourses (Lazar, 2007). It examines how power and dominance are produced through discourse, and draws upon the Foucauldian concept of “regime of truth” theory to explain the role discourse plays in constructing them. Foucault (1990) argues that they are not objective truth but are taken for granted by cultures, and that it is essential to challenge them. He maintains that with the change of discourse, such “truth” changes as well. For him, the words we use to describe a matter actually produce and create such matter (Foucault, 1990).

This paper is an attempt to question such ‘truths’ about gender roles and stereotypes as presented in the selected proverbs. Connell (2020) argues that masculine hegemony is maintained by propagating the normality of such an ideology. We concur with him, however, in that as masculine hegemony is socially constructed, it is possible to change it. Hegemony is largely achieved through stereotyping (Talbot, 2003), and one source of such stereotyping is proverbs. The crucial point in the androcentric discourse found in proverbs is that some women may not only be convinced by the image drawn in proverbs, but may use it as an ‘instruction manual’ that sets their role and guides their behaviour (Lakoff, 2003). Thus, men maintain their masculine hegemony through convincing women to accept their own version of stereotypical gender roles and power relations that govern the two sexes. This resonates with Gramsci’s (1971) conception of hegemony, which suggests that the bourgeoisie can ideologically dominate other social classes by propagating the normality of their ideologies.

### 3.2. *Ambivalent Sexism Inventory*

Glick and Fiske (2001) proposed the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory which addresses sexism against women and men. They argue that there are two types of sexism against women: *hostile sexism* – sexist misogyny towards women – and *benevolent sexism* – “subjectively favorable yet patronising beliefs about women” (p. 3). The ambivalence of sexism with its two variants, *hostile* and *benevolent*, reinforces the forms of sexism that target the subordination of women (Glick and Fiske, 1996). *Hostile sexism* tends to keep women subordinate to men by magnifying men’s power. Usually, women who defy their traditional roles are regarded as a threat to men’s domination and are overtly and blatantly stigmatised as deserving to be kept in their proper positions. Thus, *hostile sexism* might become even a portent for sexual harassment and violence towards women (Begany and Milburn, 2002). In trying to avoid the aversive repercussions of *hostile sexism*, *benevolent sexism* came to light.

*Benevolent sexism* emphasises men’s role to protect and cater to women’s needs by placing them on a pedestal in exchange for women’s conformity to traditional gender roles. This variant of sexism perceives women as beautiful and pure, yet fragile and vulnerable and, therefore, in need of men’s protection and guidance (Connelly and Heesacker, 2012; Cross and Overall, 2018; Cuddy et al. 2015; Hayes and Swim, 2013). It calls for “protective attitudes towards women, a reverence for the role of women as wives and mothers, and an idealisation of women as romantic objects” (Glick and Fiske, 1996: 492). It is a socially accepted form of sexism due to its ostensibly positive nature and call for the complementarity of men and women. Moreover, women exposed to *benevolent sexism* are more likely to engage in ‘system justification’, a process whereby people justify the status quo and believe there are no longer problems facing disadvantaged groups (Becker and Wright, 2011).

### 3.3. *Method*

In order to discern the representation of women in Egyptian proverbs, this study attempts to answer two research questions: (1) What are the major themes in the representation of women in Colloquial Egyptian proverbs (CEPs)?; and (2) How are women represented in light of *hostile* and *benevolent sexism*? To this end, we have adopted a qualitative and quantitative analysis of 385 CEPs. All Arabic examples cited in this study were translated into English by the authors.

### 3.4. *Data collection and categorisation*

The data under analysis were taken from proverbs that had been published in books or posted on the internet. The sources of our data are:

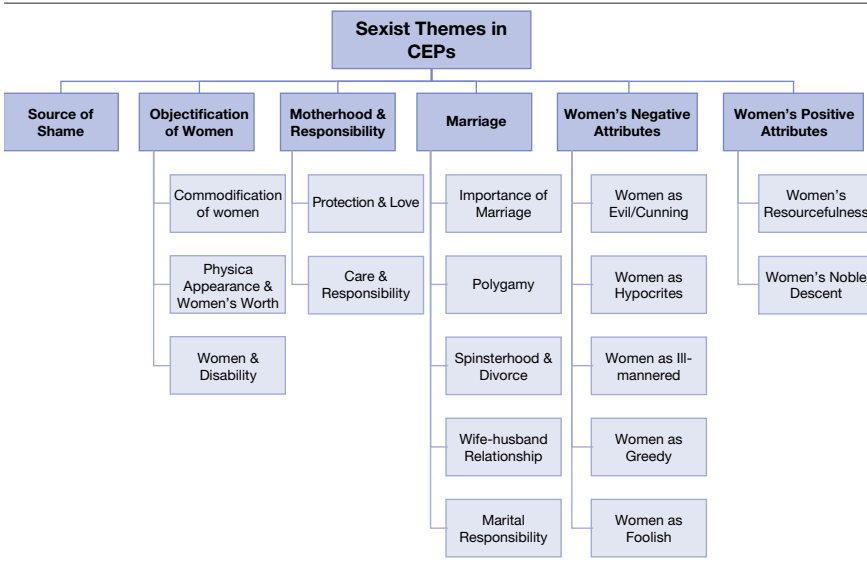
1. Taymur's (1949 [2014]) Arabic-language book of Egyptian colloquial proverbs, which comprises 3,188 proverbs, of which 318 were deemed to either explicitly or implicitly refer to women.
2. Web pages that dealt with the topic under investigation. The following search words were used: *عن المرأة/ البنات/ السيدات/ الزوجة/ الأم/ الأخت* (Colloquial Egyptian proverbs about women, girls, ladies, wives, mothers, sisters). These yielded 67 Proverbs.

The selected proverbs, which totalled 385, were examined to determine the recurrent themes or patterns and were then categorised accordingly. Proverbs that appeared more than once were excluded. In deciding the themes, the study employed the step-by-step guide introduced by Braun and Clarke (2012).

#### 4. Results and discussion

The analysis revealed six major themes and 17 subthemes (Figure 1). Due to space limitations, only the English translations of the Arabic CEPs are included.

Figure 1. Sexist themes in CEPs



Source: Own elaboration.

##### 4.1. Women as a source of shame

Some proverbs described women as dishonourable by nature. This theme deals with proverbs that explicitly or implicitly accuse women of bringing

shame to the family. They also highlight the idea that a family's honour is contingent upon the behaviour of their women. A total of 25 CEPs were found, in which fathers are considered to be humiliated just by having baby girls; people console fathers for having baby girls; and, in extreme cases, death is preferred for girls, for fear that they will lose their honour one day. These proverbs explicitly suggest extreme *hostile sexism* because they attack the mere birth of women and their right to live. Furthermore, these proverbs encourage violence against women, either physical, emotional or verbal, in order to bring them up properly – according to a patriarchal point of view – to be righteous daughters, submissive wives and caring mothers. The following proverbs exemplify this idea:

1. Death for girls is honourable.
2. If your sister dies, then your honour is preserved.
3. Either marry off your daughter or send her to the grave.
4. If you pamper your daughter, she'll dishonour you, but if you pamper your son, he'll make you proud.

These proverbs represent women as a source of shame, and value honour more than a girl's or woman's life. Some of these proverbs promote the use of violence against women, as in proverbs 1, 2 and 3. In proverb 1, death is better for a girl than to live without honour. In proverb 2, a man should be relieved by the death of his sister because he can then guarantee that his honour will not be lost at some point. Proverb 3 casts doubt over a daughter's ability to preserve her honour, exhorting fathers either to get her to marry or to kill her. Unlike the son, who is a source of pride, proverb 4 encourages tough treatment of a daughter, as cossetting her will definitely result in her bringing indignity to the family.

#### 4.2. *Objectification of women*

Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) posit that many women are sexually objectified and are valued for their use by others. Evidence of sexual objectification can be found practically everywhere, especially in cultures and environments that condone the sexualisation of women. According to Szymanski et al. (2011), sexually objectifying environments are characterised by traditional gender roles, women having less power, and a high degree of attention on the physical attributes of women's bodies. Forty-four proverbs were detected that concern this theme, which has three sub-divisions.

##### 4.2.1. *Commodification of women*

In this subtheme, women are represented as goods. Proverbs included explicit reference to goods viewed as objects to be estimated according to their material and physical value.



5. The goods won't show their defects except after pregnancy and suckling.
6. A man is like a butcher who only likes fat ones.

Women in proverb 5 are viewed as commodities that will not show their defects except after giving birth to children. In 6, women are likened to chunks of fatty meat coveted by men. Like goods, which may be worthless sometimes, women are depicted as worthless until they get pregnant in 5 or are chubby in 6.

#### 4.2.2. *Physical appearance and women's worth*

Proverbs under this subtheme discuss two topics: 1) The necessity for women to have an elegant physical appearance; and 2) The contingency of women's worth on that appearance.

7. Try to be as beautiful as you can, a glamor woman, then you can find your second half.
8. Love a deer (as a symbol of beauty) or nothing at all.
9. If you dress up a beetle, she'll be a lady.

These proverbs focus on women's beauty and personal appearance as the most important trait. In 7, a woman is urged to smarten herself up to find a suitor. Proverb 8 compares beautiful women to an animal, a 'deer', implying that women's physical beauty is their most important trait. Proverb 9 emphasises the importance of using makeup and fancy outfits to add beauty to women. Examples 10 and 11, however, deal with the lack of physical beauty.

10. What would a hairdresser do to an ugly face!
11. Instead of the makeup, clean your eyes first, you dark-skinned (girl).

These proverbs either deride ugly women or encourage them to compensate for that by taking good care of being 'clean'. Proverb 11 implies that dark-skinned women are ugly and unclean, reflecting the Egyptian male culture that prefers light-skinned to dark-skinned women.

#### 4.2.3. *Women's physical disability*

CEPs tackle the issue of women's disability in a detractive and hostile representation. These proverbs deny handicapped women any right to lead a happy or even normal life.

12. A girl can be one-eyed, and a daughter of a slave, but her wedding is on a Sunday!
13. A one-eyed woman is worthless and should buzz off even if rich.

Proverb 12 is of a classist nature. It denies disabled, black women the right to marriage, wondering how such a girl can have luck and end up in a good marriage. In 13, a woman is verbally abused for being 'one-eyed' and

she should go away even if she is rich, as a woman's beauty and physical perfection take precedence over wealth and fortune.

#### *4.3. Motherhood and responsibility*

In a patriarchal society, women are regarded as born for the primary function of giving birth to children and bringing them up. A woman is deemed as incomplete if she cannot or would not become pregnant. A total of 43 proverbs were examined with the following subthemes.

##### *4.3.1. Protection and love*

This subtheme tackles the innate love and compassion mothers have for their children, and how protective they are towards them. These proverbs emphasise women's role/feeling as mothers towards their children.

- 14. I may wish my child ill but hate (anyone) who says Amen.
- 15. He who lives with his mother will be carefree.
- 16. A beetle saw her daughter on the wall, she said: "What a pearl!"

In 14, a mother expresses her hate towards anyone who wishes her disobedient child ill even if it were in her support. Proverb 15 pinpoints women's role as mothers implying unconditional love and care. It expresses full trust in a mother's nurturing as the only guarantee that the child will be taken care of. In 16, a mother, even if she is as ugly as a beetle, will always see her daughter as beautiful. Still, a mother's status is implicitly denigrated here, being compared to an insect.

##### *4.3.2. Care and responsibility*

Proverbs encourage mothers to be resourceful in order to make life easier for their husbands and families.

- 17. The first-born daughter taught her mother how to care.
- 18. The mother builds a nest while the father drives (the chicks) away.
- 19. A pregnant cow should not defy (a bull).

Proverb 17 represents motherhood as something to be taught by practice. Thus, the first-born daughter teaches her mother the art of motherhood. Proverb 18 emphasises that it is the mother's responsibility to make her home as cosy as possible, while the father is not to be blamed for the crumbling of the 'nest', i.e. the breakdown of the household, as he is regarded as incapable of shouldering such responsibility. These proverbs, though superficially viewed as a positive representation of women compared to men, are cleverly designed to put the burden and responsibility of keeping the household exclusively on women, while giving the man the excuse to do whatever he wishes (See *benevolent sexism* in 3.2).

#### 4.4. *Marriage*

In Egyptian culture, marriage, especially in rural areas, is still the ultimate goal of many girls. This topic dominated the husband-wife relationship proverbs. A total of 205 proverbs were found tackling the issue of marriage, from which the following subthemes emerge.

##### 4.4.1. *Importance of marriage*

These proverbs encourage women to get married instead of being single. Twenty-eight proverbs were analysed in which women were persuaded that belonging to a man, whoever he is, is better than being single in a society that might harm celibate women. Moreover, a woman’s value is determined by men; if she is respected or disrespected by her husband, other people will respect or disrespect her accordingly.

20. Seek an engagement for your daughter before you do the same for your son.
21. She who has a wedding veil will live happily.
22. A man’s shadow is better than a wall’s.
23. My husband’s fire is better than my father’s paradise.

These proverbs underpin the importance of a husband in a woman’s life. Proverb 20 exhorts both fathers and mothers to prioritise marriage for their daughters before their sons. It also portrays daughters as a burden to be shaken off by marriage. The rest of the proverbs encourage girls to get married. While proverb 21 draws a desirable image of the ‘wedding veil’ and the happy life the woman will lead thereafter, proverb 22 describes ‘a man’s shadow’ as more protective for a woman than a wall’s shadow against the scorching sun, or, metaphorically, against life’s hardships. However pugnacious a husband, in 23 he is depicted as better than a loving father.

##### 4.4.2. *Polygamy*

Seventeen proverbs tackled polygamy, 12 of which promote it while five are against it.

24. He who marries two women is either a capable or licentious man.
25. The husband of two women is a groom every night.
26. If you marry two women, you’ll live in constant misery.

In 24, a man who marries two women is being labelled as either virile or lecherous. Proverb 25 encourages men to be polygamous. Some proverbs, however, warn against polygamy, such as 26, which warns a man against marrying two women or he will be consigned to perdition.

#### 4.4.3. *Spinsterhood and divorce*

Spinsterhood and divorce are seen as shameful conditions for any woman. A woman who did not get married at all is regarded as a burden to her family. On the other hand, if a woman gets married and then divorced, she is blamed as being responsible for the wreckage of the home.

- 27. A spinster is more worthy of her father's house.
- 28. Being a spinster is better than a failed marriage.

In 27, a single woman should not live alone and should go back to her father's house because she might be a victim to rumours. On the other hand, proverb 28 advises women not to marry any suitor hurriedly, or else divorce could ensue.

#### 4.4.4. *Wife-husband relationship*

Proverbs here reinforce the stereotypical roles depicted for women as caregiving, submissive and supportive of their husbands. Up to 105 CEPs were found in which women's societal status is conditional upon their treatment by men.

- 29. He who calls his wife one-eyed encourages people to think little of her.
- 30. He who calls his wife 'lady' encourages people to greet her at the stairs.
- 31. A true man will never ask for a woman's opinion.
- 32. Take her under your sleeve or she'll cause you trouble.

Both proverbs 29 and 30 imply that a woman receives people's respect or disrespect depending on whether her husband respects or disrespects her. This implies that women are worthless by themselves. Example 31 is a sexist proverb inciting men to marginalise women. In 32, a man is goaded to contain his wife and accustom her to his habits, or else she will upset him.

#### 4.4.5. *Marital responsibility*

These proverbs ingrain male supremacy and attempt to convince women that a clever and obedient wife will lead a happy life.

- 33. A clever woman would turn on the oven without gas.
- 34. (A woman is) like a candle that burns to offer light to others.
- 35. If your husband finds out you're absent, you can be away for the rest of the day.
- 36. A woman who goes out a lot will never be able to bring up children.

While proverb 33 praises resourceful women, proverb 34 describes a woman as benevolent and altruistic. Proverb 35 implies that women need permission from their husbands to go out, otherwise they are advised not to come back. Proverb 36 stimulates women to stay at home to bring up children.

#### 4.5. *Women’s negative attributes*

This theme, which comprised 65 proverbs, attributes negative traits to women, projecting the stereotypical image of a woman as a source of misery to man. Five subthemes were detected: cunningness, hypocrisy, greediness, foolishness and ill manners.

##### 4.5.1. *Women as evil/cunning*

Women in Egyptian society are usually blamed for the evil things that happen because they are either jealous of other women or envious of the better life conditions of others. That is why women are accused of being malevolent and using black magic. Out of 17 proverbs found, the following illustrate this idea:

- 37. A witch will not win in this life or in the afterlife.
- 38. He told her to go to hell; she replied: “I’m not going alone.”
- 39. Women are way more devious than men.

In 37, women are depicted as practicing witchcraft, which will lead to their perdition in both this life and the afterlife. In 38, women are inexorable naggers who will not leave men alone. Example 39 depicts women as more deceitful than men.

##### 4.5.2. *Women as hypocrites*

Women are regarded as hypocrites in ten proverbs in the data, especially in connection with other women whom they pretend to befriend.

- 40. A woman extends condolences while gloating.
- 41. Girls have seven faces.

Women are portrayed as hypocrites in that they show something on the surface while their true hidden feelings are totally different.

##### 4.5.3. *Women as ill-mannered*

This subtheme (22 proverbs) depicts women to be ill-mannered, abusive and loud-voiced, and using vulgar and inappropriate ways to get what they want.

- 42. The foul-mouthed (woman) is her neighbours’ master.
- 43. They said: “You’re going to get married and live with your in-laws.” She replied: “Then I’ll have my tongue and I’ll win.”

In 42, a vituperative, vulgar woman is depicted as dominating other people who usually fear debasing themselves by dealing with her. Example 43 portrays a woman as a scold whose real weapon is her ‘tongue’ which she will use as a defence against any family meddling.

#### 4.5.4. *Women as greedy*

Women are usually depicted as more avaricious than men (four CEPs).

44. With your money you can have the Sultan's daughter as your bridegroom.
45. A (female) ogre gave a banquet. They said: "Will it be sufficient for her and her kids? (Let alone other people who might be invited!)."

Women in 44 are depicted as gold diggers who will marry for no other reason than money, no matter how enormously wealthy they are (the Sultan's daughters). It also means that a man can marry any woman if he is rich. In 45, the woman is likened to an 'ogre', which, in the Egyptian culture, alludes to an overly voracious and rapacious person. She is portrayed as a creature so gluttonous that even a banquet would barely be enough for her and her kids, not to mention other guests.

#### 4.5.5. *Women as foolish*

In male-dominated societies, women are conveniently accused of being foolish in order to prove that they need guidance and protection all the time. Twelve proverbs denote this idea.

46. She left her child crying and went to pamper her neighbour's child.
47. He who confides his secret to his wife will suffer a lot.
48. Listen to a woman but don't take her opinion.

In example 46, women's foolishness is exemplified in their attention to other people's problems while disregarding their own. Such folly leads a woman to be unworthy of a man's confidence or request for advice, and he is advised not to take her as a confidante, as in 47, or a sound opinion giver, as in 48.

#### 4.6. *Women's positive attributes*

The data relating to presenting women in a positive light were minimal – only four proverbs. It was noticed that their portrayal is either linked to another negatively labelled woman (49), or associated with something denoting severe conditions with which she has to cope (50 and 51), causing a discernible dent in her positive representation.

49. The *clever woman* would accomplish the task alone, but the *clumsy one* would call her neighbour.
50. The clever woman would weave with *a donkey's leg*.
51. Take the well-bred (woman) even if she (were living) on *a floor mat*.

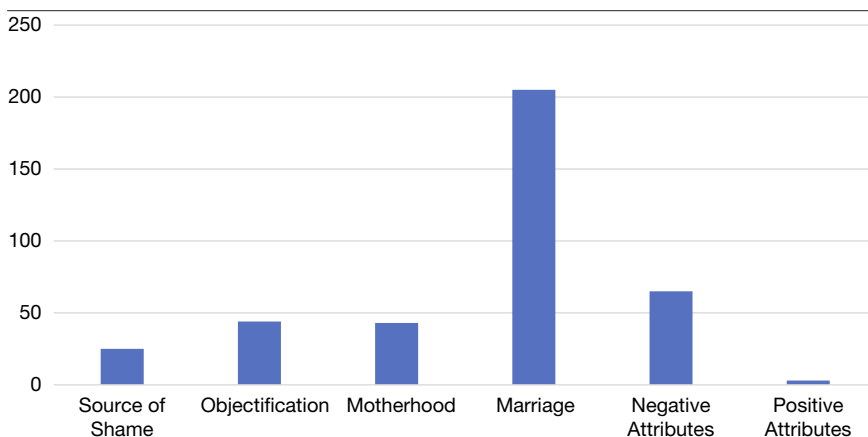
Proverb 49 underpins women's resourcefulness in managing their homes. They are contrasted, however, with another type of 'clumsy' women lacking

such skills. Proverb 50 exhorts the woman to do house chores on her own, only aided, metaphorically, by the crudest tools, i.e. ‘a donkey’s leg’. In 51, men are urged to marry well-bred women even if they were so destitute that they live on a ‘floor mat’.

## 5. Discussion

According to Mieder (2014), proverbs meet the human need to encapsulate experiences and observations into “nuggets of wisdom that provide ready-made comments on personal relationships and social affairs” (p. 16). It can be concluded from the analysis that the thematic distribution of CEPs reflects how Egyptian society perceives women and their socio-cultural roles. Figure 2 shows the thematic representation of women in the data.

**Figure 2.** Thematic representation of women



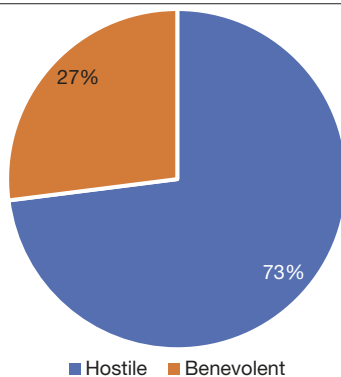
Source: Own elaboration.

The analysis revealed that as far as the representation of women is concerned, the theme of marriage was the most common in CEPs, constituting almost 53% of the data, followed by the theme of Negative Attributes of Women (17%). Depicting women in a positive light was, however, the least frequently occurring theme, constituting less than 0.7%. Thus, this cultural ‘instruction manual’ for women is more dedicated to the relationship between women and men, and to women’s role within the framework of marriage. The fact that women’s negative attributes were the second most important theme gives insight into the sexist notions of a society which harnessed proverbs as a cultural and instructive messaging tool to propagate negative ideas about women. The objectification of women was the third most common theme, as such proverbs aim to inculcate the already entrenched idea that women are reduced to mere objects to appease men’s desires and to convince

women themselves that their value and worth is tied to such a role. The thematic analysis also shows that very few CEPs dealt with positive attributes of women that were not used to serve sexist purposes.

The analysis also revealed two types of sexism in the data under analysis, hostile sexist proverbs (HSPs) and benevolent sexist proverbs (BSPs). As Figure 3 shows, there were more HSPs (73%) than BSPs (27%).

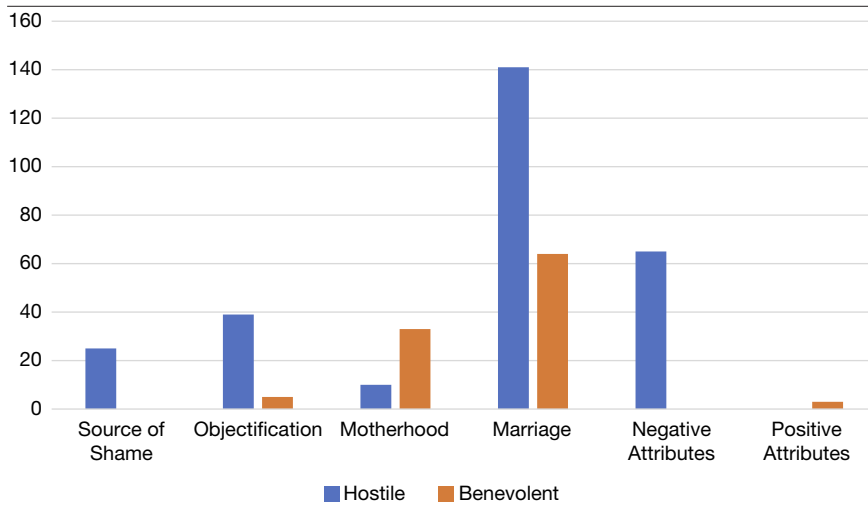
**Figure 3.** Hostile vs. Benevolent Sexism in CEPs



Source: Own elaboration.

A closer examination of the data revealed that themes displayed differences in relation to the ratio of HSPs to BSPs. The highest frequency of BSPs was in *Marriage* and *Motherhood* while the highest HSPs occurred in *Marriage* and *Women's Negative Attributes*. From another perspective, there were themes that depended entirely on HSPs, while others saw a combination of both. This can be explained by the nature of the theme and the aim of the proverb. Thus, themes which are highly critical of women, such as *Source of Shame*, depended entirely on HSPs. Such themes mainly target and address men. Both HSPs and BSPs were used, however, in other themes which mainly address women, or in some cases men and women, especially those related to *Marriage* and *Motherhood*. We argue that these two themes address women in order to entice them to accept the status quo of gender inequality and social injustice, and not only treat women as the marked gender but also burden them with cumbersome responsibilities. This conforms to Dardenne et al.'s (2007) argument that *benevolent sexism* encourages women to prioritise relationships (family, children, etc.) over pursuing educational or professional goals, but weakens their belief in their own skills and performances.



**Figure 4.** Hostile and Benevolent Sexism across Themes

Source: Own elaboration.

## 6. Conclusion

Proverbs are the “distilled wisdom of a group of people and their study can provide insights into the activities, interests and philosophy of the people who created them” (Todd and Hancock, 2005: 313). This article discussed the representation of women in Colloquial Egyptian proverbs (CEPs), conducting a thematic analysis within an FCDA perspective. Employing Glick and Fiske’s (2001) Ambivalent Sexism Inventory, it is thus the first to investigate this topic in CEPs, which is a point of departure in this field. The analysis, which revealed six major themes and 17 subthemes, showed that the CEPs were mostly designed to reinforce male supremacy over women. Women were portrayed as a ready source of shame if they did not obey the rules of the patriarchal society. *Hostile sexism* gets most insidious when some CEPs inculcate in fathers and brothers the idea that death for ‘disobedient’ girls is the path to honour. Women were also objectified and commodified, where their worth is conditional upon their physical appearance. Handicapped women are so meritless that they are not even entitled to marriage. Findings showed *benevolent sexism* in a number of CEPs superficially valuing women for their stereotyped female attributes of domesticity and nurturing of their children. A streak of denigration is felt, however, in likening women to some animals or insects. By depicting the woman as the household’s sole and submissive caregiver, the man’s nonchalant and care-free mood is aggrandised. While unmarried or divorced women are drawn in a negative light, it is men’s projection of their wives’ appearance that gives those women their high or low esteem in society. The analysis revealed

a strong pattern that aimed to disparage women rather than affirm male superiority. Women were depicted as dependent and in danger of being victimised if they do not dedicate their lives to the service of men. While the negative traits attributed to women were many (e.g. evil, cunning, hypocrites, ill-mannered, greedy and foolish), their only positive attributes in CEPs were those related to being care-giving and sacrificing wives and mothers. Finally, we believe that by changing the discursive practices that negatively portray women or enforce male dominance and female subordination, change can be made to such practices and sexist ideologies. We do not know when the critical moment will come “when our small influence might be amplified and guide the course of systems far larger and more complex than ourselves” (Lemke, 1993: 272) but we can still endeavour to help the process of change until it becomes an alternative “regime of truth” one day.

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