

Ordering the Social World: A Sociolinguistic Analysis of Gender Roles In Pakhtun Folk Wisdom

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Gender roles and division of labor have been exhaustively researched in the recent decades. Many studies address gender bias and disparity and strive for striking a balance between the roles of men and women. This paper argues that roles are culturally conditioned and based on cultural relativism, Pakhtun society segregate masculine and feminine domains for peaceful co-existence. Guided by the theoretical perspective of Herbert Mead (1901-1978) division of labor is not always discriminatory or biased and its existence can be justified in particular settings. The findings of the study are based on qualitative linguistic analysis of collated folk *tappas* (plural of *tappa*) from archived (and/or) published collections and their authors' interpretations. The study intends to investigate and highlight gender role segregation as projected in the language of *tappas* with a view to establish their relevance to social order in the long history of Pakhtuns residing on Pak-Afghan border in the north-west frontier province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The findings of the study conclude that gender roles fit into the patriarchal social structure of Pakhtuns and define social roles and responsibilities for peaceful co-existence of the two genders.

Keywords: *language; cultural relativism; Pakhtun; gender; Pakhtunwali*

The argument of the study is based on the anthropological perspective of cultural conditioning which emphasizes the role of culture in shaping attitudes, behaviors, social practices and above all gender roles to maintain division of labor. The crux of the approach is to find out, ascertain and delimit the role of biology or nature in determining role differences. It primarily focuses on exploring cultural aspects of life that shape personality and provide distinct identity to its members through socialization and cultural conditioning over generations. In the context, the findings of the study are based on Margaret Mead's (1930) *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies*, which points to cultural conditioning as opposed to biology in defining social roles of male and females. Her study reveals that each of the three societies have their own relative gender roles, which could not work properly in other societies. This idea of cultural relativism is dominant in her work and it is thus a model for the current study.

Anthropologically, every society has its own culture, which according to E.B. Tyler (1871) is the sum total of the knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, laws, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of a particular society. It evolves into a life style and design that is learnt, shared and transmitted to coming generations. With the passage of time, complexity occurs in social and cultural relations of people that affect the outlook of the culture and also bring changes in human relations and relative gender roles. It is a fact that men and women have interacted for centuries and that can provide material for learning about gender role. However, medium of transformation of these gender roles is culture and thus it creates a unique personality, which is a debate of present discussion.

Sex and gender defines role attainment and thus form basis for division of labor in society. It also divides society into masculine and feminine gender with their respective roles. Historically, man has dominated the overall social fabric which according to Marvin Harris (1977) has been mainly because of physical strength. He argues that earlier societies were organized in small groups that had to secure their place and position from other rival groups. They would need physically strong individuals who could involve in hand to hand combat and in this regard men were far ahead in display of strength, power and bravery in comparison to women. Thus, male members emerged saviors and females became commodities and rewards for the strong and the powerful. Resultantly, women are assigned secondary and less warlike tasks like cooking, weeding, grinding, firewood, and feeding. Harris believes that this prehistoric mindset still survives and women are still considered inferior. In comparison, Lemer (1986) notes lack of healthcare system and the challenge of survival as pivotal to the assignment of gender roles in early history. With a view to ensure the safe delivery and care of a child, woman was confined in her role to concentrate on her pregnancy, delivery and nursing roles. On the other hand, man was to hunt, trade, fight and move around that has historically been the major reason behind his sway in public domain. Huber (1990) also supported the argument and added that men controlled the affairs and relegated women to secondary position in social structure.

On the contrary, Cynthia Fuchs Epstein (1986) does not support biology as answer to gender differences. To her, differences are hidden solely in social factors i.e. in socialization and in social control. She finds egalitarian setups in earlier societies like *Agta* and *Mubti* and argues that gender roles were less clearly defined and less rigid. In contemporary world, she identifies rigidly enforced social arrangements responsible for segregated gender roles. Predominantly male-dominated, majority societies restrict women's role through informal customs and formal system of laws. Once these socially constructed barriers are removed, a woman can and does exhibit similar work habits as a male, she further adds.

Another approach to rationalize gender role differences is that of cultural relativism which 'mean that function and meaning of a trait is relative to its cultural setting. A trait is neither good nor bad in itself. It is good or bad only with reference to a culture in which it has to function' (Horton & Hunt, 1996, p. 63). Accordingly, every culture survives in a particular setting and assigns gender roles based on their utility. The findings of one culture may not apply to study another culture and they may vary in the way they interpret division of labor. The same observations also applied to George Peter Murdock's (1937) study of 324 societies when he concluded that what was considered male/female work differed markedly from one society to another. Had Biology been the only answer, all the societies would have more or less similar scheme for gender roles and division of labor.

Anthropologically, culturally relativistic division of labor is universal in which gender dominates sex. In his classic study of three primitive societies in Northeastern New Guinea i.e. *Arapesh*; *Moundugumor* and *Tchambuli*, Margaret Mead (1930) found a different and unique conception of gender roles in each case. For instance, the *Arapesh* community was less conflict-ridden and thus both men and women cooperated in farming and were gentle in treating each other. The people of *Moundugumor* on the other hand were known for cannibalistic practices and were fond of warfare that had made them value aggressive and violent behaviour. Thus, male roles were more dominant and the hostile environment necessitated the value for physical strength in comparison the burdensome and less rewarding female task of child birth and rearing. Lastly, the headhunting society of *Tchambuli* had women responsible for village's business. They would earn and feed the family. They were also responsible for farming, fishing, and manufacturing. They were easygoing, hardworking, and reliable while men were inferior to them in their roles. The latter would live principally for art. Every man was artist mostly skilled in many ways such as dancing, painting and flute-playing. Other studies that highlight the importance of cultural set-up and geographical environment in determining gender roles include Elisa Buenaventura-Posso and Susan E. Brown's (1980) study of *Bari* of Columbia. They found the society fully egalitarian with no stratification and differential access to resources. They also noted full sexual symmetry, individual autonomy and valuing each person's work as equal.

Based on cultural relativistic approach, every culture has its own unique behavioral pattern i.e. division of labor. Likewise, '[t]he notion that certain tasks are best accomplished by women rather than men or vice versa is one that appears throughout most societies' (Bell (1981). Cultural studies indicate

A SOCIOLINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF GENDER ROLES

that both women and men contribute valuable services in their respective domains. Private/public sphere dichotomy is correlated with certain forms of socio-cultural organization as Lila Leibowitz (1989) notes that tasks assigned to what class of persons undoubtedly depends in part on local circumstances and in part on local traditions. However, the dominance of men in many communal affairs, according to anthropologists, should not necessarily imply women as less important or secondary in their contribution.

Like other societies, Pakhtuns also regulate their lives according to its customs and traditions summed up in the code of honor- *Pakhtunwali*. Anthropological studies of the society have explained the social setup and the code. Barth (1959) has used *Game Theory* to explain a sense of competition among Pakhtuns for attaining social equality. Ahmad's (1980) study of *Muhmand* Pakhtun along Durand Line between Pakistan and Afghanistan highlights a fact that tribal society of *Muhmand* describes a tribal nature in a state of equilibrium. None of these anthropologists have addressed issues of women's empowerment and cultural conditioning in Pakhtun culture. Barth has admitted to address bonds of social equality and Ahmad has focused on function of *Pakhtunwali* to ensure equality among members in Pakhtun society. However, highlighting gender roles and the prevailing social setup can set the stage for long lasting reforms and empowerment. The present study then is an attempt to lay bare the idealized Pakhtun woman as portrayed in the folk oral tradition of *tappa*. The study is important to inform policy makers and social workers about future challenges to address the issue of gender development.

Folk wisdom: Pakhtu Tappa

Folk wisdom forms a prominent aspect of Pakhtun life. Primarily a tribal society, not much can be said about their history scientifically. Most of the traditions have been transmitted from generation to generation orally. A significant part of the oral tradition includes folk wisdom in all its manifestations such as proverbs, folk stories, folk songs etc. They serve fountain source of socialization and education from which people of all ages learn and take inspiration. Overall, the folk literature of Pakhtuns envisions society and the idealized social order where all its members are taught how to behave and survive in collectively. Linguists and historians are of the view that popular literature of Pakhtuns originated from traditional folk songs, which enjoy variety in its forms and types. Among them, *tappa* is considered the oldest and the most representative of the nature of its people (Tair, 1987). Sahar Katozai (2005) finds its traces in the 16th century; Salma Shaheen (1984) places its origin in the 6th century A.D. while Abdullah Jan Abid (2008) argues that it is as old as the Pakhtun nation. This song type consists of two lines with the first one shorter (9 syllables) and the second one longer (13 syllables). The lines do not rhyme with each other but each ends in suffixes like *-ina*, *-una*, *-ana* or *-ama* (MacKenzie, 1958, p. 322; Katozai, 2005, p. 321). In popular literature, it is also called *landay*, or *misra* (verse or line). Semantically, *landay* means short or concise and as the first line of *tappa* is short therefore it is called *landay*. It is also called *misra* (sentence) on three grounds. First, the two lines are sung as one line or sentence and second, *misri* means sugar or sweet in Pakhtu and as *tappa* is very dear to heart, it is therefore associated with sugar. Thirdly, the Egyptian sword known for its sharpness is also called *misra* in which sense *tappa* like the sword is sharp and effective in its impact on human heart. *Landay* is common in the dialect of Pakhtu towards Afghanistan while *tappa* or *misra* is associated with the tribes in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Abid, 2008; Enevoldsen, 2004; Shaheen, 1984; Tair, 1980).

Research Study

Based on the qualitative analysis of the language of *tappas*, the study is significant to highlight the relative gender roles and division of labor. In itself, *tappa* is of seminal importance among Pakhtuns and a major source of folk wisdom and cultural education. According to Enevoldsen (2004), *tappas* are anonymous 'ultra-short stories' that deal with feelings and emotions 'stamped with the image of the soul of a people' (pp. xi, xv). The themes are beyond age and time related to idealized deeds, gender roles and spirituality. It has preserved the age old traditions; bluntly criticize the wrong doer and disdains those who violate the Pakhtun code of honor (Abid, 2008; Shaheen, 1984; Tair, 1980). In the following sections, the language of *tappas* seconded by field observations is analyzed to highlight the pattern of cultural and societal control mechanism for defining gender roles to order the social world in which the Pakhtuns survive. Sample *tappas* are specifically focused with reference to their wording and linguistic labels that reinforce gendered division of labor and discourage trespassing for greater harmony.

Method

This study is based on the qualitative analysis of more than 3000 collated folk *tappas* from archived (and/or) published collections and their authors' interpretations. The collection was made in the year 2010 as part of research study at master level with the assistance of Pakhtu Academy, University of Peshawar. During the course of selection, the *tappas* were thematically divided and only those were selected that related to the theme of gender role and division of labor. The analysis is guided and informed by the theory of Cultural relativism and cultural conditioning while *tappas* are treated as a discourse in Foucauldian sense that implies 'ways of constituting knowledge, together with social practices, forms of subjectivity, and power relations' (Durrani, 2008, p. 599; Weedon, 1997, p. 105).

Results and Discussion

The analysis of the corpus of *tappas* clearly delineates gender roles and their respective position in the division of labor. Pakhtun society is tribal in nature and majority of the population reside in hilly and mountainous areas. The rate of literacy is low and the predominant occupation remains agriculture. Three major sources of internal disputes include money, land and women. A considerable number of families suffer from either form of the disputes over generations. The superior social virtues include guarding one's family/tribal honor and display of bravery and courage in social situations. The folk *tappas* profusely relate to such themes and in consequence man is praised in public domain while women are repeatedly acknowledged in the role of protecting family honor. The latter are idealized in the domestic domain and one important role that women play is their moral support to men (Mumtaz, 1987; Tair, 1980). The portrayal of men and women is based on the surrounding social realities and local conditions that preserve and reinforce the ideals of Pakhtun society. Pakhtuns, as said earlier, is a collection of male-dominated competing tribes that strive for existence against all odds where success in public sphere depends on physical strength and bravery. Men, therefore, dominate the corpus of *tappas* in that sphere and women are describes in a secondary and supportive role. On the other hand, women are given charge of the home affairs and men are idealized for facilitating them in their daily matters and to make the home a safer place for their female family members.

With reference to masculinity and the status of ideal man, he is associated with power, courage, honor and energy. *Tappas* contain several references to kings and monarch in Pakhtun history like Ahmad Shah Abadali and Sher Shah Suri and exhorts men to emulate their brave feats (Enevoldsen, 2004). With reference to wars and battles, men are expected to embrace death than disgrace. A famous *tappa* relate such expectations with reference to the historical battle of Maiwand in Afghanistan and says: *If you return alive from Maiwand, I Pray, that God may keep you alive to taste disgrace* (Enevoldsen, 2004, p. 34; Shaheen, 1984, p. 541, Shaheen, 1988-9, p. 53). In other words, it exalts manhood and honor in iron man (Ahmed, 1980; Shaheen, 1984). The portrayal is not necessarily biological as in another *tappa* cultural relativity is asserted for claiming superiority. It says, '*Saray pa num na saray kege/Saray haga day che ye kaar da saro wena* ((A man is not called a man because of his name/A man is he who behaves like men) (Katozai, 2005, p. 323). Thus, the oral tradition of *tappa* views men and their presence an indispensable feature of social life. It is only through their heroism and unfaltering courage that life can operate the way the culture interprets it.

When looked at from the perspective of women, *tappa* does not contain the same kind of enthusiasm and fun and the life circumstances are marked by trials and tribulations. Women are heard complaining the miseries they encounter and the predominantly lonely and isolated life they lead (Enevoldsen, 2004). They best explain the situation as: *The world is life's deserted bazaar, For sale is nothing but sorrow from start to finish* (p. 60). Their married life is no less challenging and the indifference of in-laws drives them to long for the good old days at their parents' homes (Tair & Edwards, 2006). Culturally, women are considered weaker and less suitable for display of physical strength in a tribal setup. It is therefore the responsibility of men to guard their honor and to protect them. The *tappas* endorse gender identity pattern and value those women who have their fathers or brothers alive. Women also feel safe in their presence and they are often heard reminding their lovers, *Brother less I am certainly not, If you won't defend my honor, then my brother will* (Enevoldsen, 2004, p. 40).

A SOCIOLINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF GENDER ROLES

As said, Pakhtun cultural setup is patriarchal where men are expected to dominate the public domain. They are also expected to defend their families and tribes against any aggression. Thus, they live a life full of dangers and threats with less space for enjoyment. One major source of joy for a man is his family life, wife and children. More specifically, the wife is expected to distract his attention from the burden of public life and outside worries. She therefore has to take great care of herself and the children. Many *tappas* also deal with the appearance and behavior of women. In one *tappa*, a lady is praised for her physical beauty as: *Her dress is black, her veil is black, she wears black shawl over her head, she looks good* (Shaheen, 1984, p. 169). According to the ideals of the culture, women are expected to remain loyal to their spouse or family, to gracefully accept family decisions and not to revolt against the system (Shaheen, 1988-9). In several *tappas*, women address their lovers and impress upon them that they would not go against their family traditions in marriage and would accept their parents' decision as final. They are expected to sacrifice their love for the sake of the family (Shaheen, 1984; Tair, 1980). At several places, women give vent to their helplessness in challenging family decision about their marriages (Shaheen, 1988-9; Shaheen, 1984; Tair, 1980). Failure in love affair due to family decisions is gracefully accepted but annoyance keeps reverberating in her private life, *Da Pakhtano Pakhtu ta gora; Chi lor au khor laka sarway bea kawena (Look at the Pakhtu of Pakhtuns; like cattle they decide the fate of sisters and daughters* (Shaheen, 1984, p. 299). As a responsible and honored woman, she also does not assert herself or commit to her lover. She knows well that it would be her family in the end to decide her fate (Tair, 1980, p. 74).

In a tribal setup, a petty matter may become the source of enmity between families and therefore women are expected to guard themselves and to keep away from outsiders both physically and in the expression of their sorrows (Habibi, 1980; Khan, 2008). In one *tappa*, a woman says: *Sta na pagram ke kama na yam / Kam asla na yam chi ba kali khabrawomana (I am no less in grief than you / But I am not ill-bred to let it be known to the village)* (Shaheen, 1984, p. 461). It reflects the behavior of a mannered Pakhtun woman who suffers at hands of her family but her family honor does not allow her to reveal the same to others. In another sense, those people particularly women who share their private sorrows with others are looked down upon and are disliked.

In Pakhtun society, gender roles are clearly defined and both men and women are expected to contribute their part in social life. For maintaining order, the society has an elaborate code of Pakhtunwali from which all members derive their rights and responsibilities. Men are to earn and to fight if needed and women are to stay at home, to look after the family. Based on public life experiences, men are to decide and take or initiate crucial steps for the betterment of the family while women are expected to provide support in the implementation of such decisions. In the same way, the corpus of *tappas* also alludes to gender roles and division of labor (Habibi, 1980; Tair, 1980; Shaheen, 1984). As said in one place, *Take me with you when you go to war, I shall collect your empty shells for you, my darling* (Enevoldsen, 2004, p. 42). Thus, even if the situation demands, her role may be secondary and supportive (Roheela, 1988). At home, a woman is expected to constantly remind men of their social and familial obligations and to spur their revenge. If a man fails to perform his basic responsibility of defending family honor, a woman then would present herself to replace him in which case, no man would imagine himself that lower in courage and manliness. By doing so, women perform their roles and also reinforce gendered division of labor. In an oft-quoted *tappa*, a young woman says, *If the young could not defend you, O my motherland, your maidens will defend you against your enemy* (Abid, 2008, p. 339; Enevoldsen, 2004; p. 36; Roheela, 1988, p. 14; Shaheen, 1984, p. 549).

In Pakhtun society, women less frequently appear and perform in public life. They derive their pride and honor based on the heroic characters of their men as defined in the code of *Pakhtunwali* (Enevoldsen, 2004). To note, it is a common observation among Pakhtuns to praise or condemn people guided by the code (Spain, 1963, p. 68). The analysis of *tappas* is also witness to women who are heard voicing their joy and pride by praising the brave deeds of men (Enevoldsen 2004; Katozai, 2005; Shaheen, 1984; Habibi, 1980). In one instance, a woman says, *Janaan pa jang ke tora okra, ma ta hamzoley pa tandi salaam kawena (My love proved his mettle in battle; my friends salute me with their hands on their foreheads* (Shaheen, 1984, p. 183). According to Roheela (1988), a Pakhtun woman also remains aware that a slight display of cowardice by her lover would bring bad name to the family and would damage her

reputation. She therefore does not forget to remind him, *O' my beloved! Don't run away from the battlefield, otherwise I will get the blame from my companions* (Roheela, 1988, p. 51).

Among Pakhtuns, bravery and courage are among the precious possessions of a man. His gender identity stems from his manliness. A mother also yearns for it and says, *I pray to you God! Never bestow me with a son; who is bereft of manliness, even if I die in the hope of having one* (Abid, 2008, p. 338). In comparison, the corpus did not contain any instance of a mother praying for the birth of a female child that is understandable in the particular local situation in which Pakhtuns survive. Due to severe life conditions, Pakhtun women are expected to look after the family and to avoid situation that could distract the attention of their men. They, therefore, remain submissive and obedient. Ideally, they may go the extent of saying, *The rope is yours and the neck is mine; if you sell me in the bazaar, I shall go with you* (Enevoldsen, 2004, p. 44, Shaheen, 1984, p. 304).

During the analysis of the corpus of *tappas*, a clear line can be drawn between gender roles and division of labor. Informed by the code of *Pakhtunwali*, *tappas* also construct a social world where masculinity and femininity are interpreted according to the local traditions. In Pakhtun society, there is a cultural dislike for imitation of or any resemblance with the opposite sex (Shaheen, 1988-9; Tair, 1980; Tair, 1982; Tair & Edwards, 2006). The linguistic analysis also reveal that words are gendered in the local context and it may not be culturally appropriate to address and label a person with words reserved for the opposite sex. In local context, the use of a single word may be enough to contextualize a meaningful gendered message. For instance, words that relate to masculine gender include *nar* (brave), *zwan* (young and full of energy), *saray* (man); while feminine gender is represented by *hayanaka* (pious); *wafadara* (loyal); *purdahnaka* (wearing veil); *nazaka* (fickle); *kor* (home) etc.

Pakhtun women strictly observe *pardah* (veil), guard their privacy and are expected to remain in the confines of their homes. They are not encouraged to go shopping or indulge in other activities in public domain. Thus, they remain dependent on men for their basic needs (Shaheen, 1988-9). Several *tappas* relate to the needs and desires of women where they are heard asking the male family members to bring clothes, bangles and jewellery (Enevoldsen, 2004; Shaheen, 1984). The observance of *pardah* also restrict the movement of lovers and they find it difficult to meet that is mourned frequently by them as in one instance, a lover complains, *O girl! May your old father die; he sleeps during day time and guards you during night* (Shaheen, 1988-9, p. 67). Likewise, the beloved also does not feel at ease at home away from her lover. She would leave no chance of seeing him and would pray for her lover to come when she is alone. She would send an instant invitation when appropriate as, *It is time for you to come to my home; my mother is away, I am all alone at home* (Shaheen, 1984, p. 518).

Conclusion

The purpose of the study was to investigate the gender roles and the pattern of division of labor among Pakhtuns in the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The findings of the study were based on the content and linguistic analysis of *tappa* which is an old and primary expression of folk wisdom. In Pakhtun society, *tappas* are given a special status and are quoted and repeated like proverbs. Apart from amusement, they contain social lessons and cultural teachings that form a significant part of cultural education. Majority of the people like them and learn them by heart and embellish their conversation with them in a proverbial fashion. The main objective of the study was to analyze the application of nature versus nurture on the gender roles and division of labor.

Guided by the theory of cultural conditioning and cultural relativism, the study concludes that the concept of gender is integral to Pakhtun culture. Learned socially, majority of gender roles and division of labor are in accordance with the age old code of honor- *Pakhtunwali* to build culturally relative personalities. It is also observed that neither of the two is less important and both have a significant contribution to preserve the culture. Men have their own sphere of activities while women perform a set of culturally approved roles that are less suited for the former. The roles can best be appreciated when approached from the perspective that Pakhtun culture is predominantly patriarchal, primitive, and rural. *Tappas* also reinforce the pattern of local culture with a view to order the Pakhtun social world. Women are idealized in the confines of homes and through the system of *pardah* or veiling. Their roles are clearly

A SOCIOLINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF GENDER ROLES

defined and segregated from the culturally defined masculine world. Men earn, feed and defend family honor while woman primarily sets the house in order. The masculine gender is associated with material possessions like weapons and guns while women own physical beauty, peaceful looks, honored being and submissive nature. *Tappas* also describe culturally significant themes like faith, honor, friends, enemies and power structure that form the basis of Pakhtun society.

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