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Voices of Tradition: Gender Portrayal in Punjabi Proverbs from Chak Zahir District

Mandi Bahauddin, Punjab, Pakistan

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Abstract

This study investigates gender representation in Punjabi proverbs, challenging the prevailing view that they solely perpetuate patriarchy. Analyzing 43 proverbs collected from native speakers in Chak Zahir, Punjab, the research employs Judith Butler's performativity theory to explore how language shapes gender identity within cultural contexts. Findings indicate that while many proverbs target women, often portraying them as inferior, they also honor maternal figures. Notably, proverbs serve as wisdom texts that reflect societal norms and can be used by women to contest gender ideologies. The study concludes that Punjabi proverbs embody the complexities of cultural expression and should not be solely viewed as instruments of gender discrimination. Instead, they reveal a nuanced interplay of power and identity influenced by gender, age, and class, highlighting the need for a broader examination of their implications in Punjabi culture.

Keywords: Gender, Gender Portrayal, Stereotypes, Proverbs, Punjab

Introduction

A proverb is a simple and popular saying in any language that is used to give advice. Proverbs are analytical tools of thought. They are based on expert advice, and people in any culture have a firm belief that the proverbs are made from factual real-life events. Proverbs are culturally specific and easy to understand for common This study explores how gender portrayal is expressed and verbalized using Punjabi proverbs amongst the Punjabi-speaking population in Pakistan. Prior work on Punjabi proverbs has exaggerated proverbs as a source of the subservient position of the women of Punjab as well as a cultural asset. Most studies have aimed to uphold Punjabi proverbs as the main cause of patriarchy in Punjabi culture. This study depicts that proverbs have an adverse effect on gender social behavior and may cause gender-discriminatory attitudes in Punjabi society. This has been analyzed by discussing how native Punjabi speakers view the impact of proverbs on gender social behaviors and by analyzing the impact of Punjabi proverbs on the specification of gender roles.

Proverbs: Conceptual Understanding

“Proverbs are succinct expressions that convey authority and insight” (Winick, 2003). These brief sayings encapsulate meanings that can travel from family circles to broader communities, reflecting commonly accepted truths rooted in cultural traditions (Mieder,2004, p.23). Originating from folk wisdom, proverbs encapsulate cultural values and experiences, although their relevance can diminish over time. Historically, proverbs predate written literature, serving as vital tools for communication in societies with limited literacy (Ahmad,2004). Their meanings often carry deep significance, offering advice or reflecting historical contexts (Jain,1976). The rhetorical structure of proverbs frequently employs literary devices such as metaphor, repetition, and rhyme, enriching their persuasive impact ((Ghilzai, Sultana, & Zeeshan, 2020)

Primarily, proverbs educate communities in accessible ways. However, as Moreno (2005) notes, the absence of certain proverbs in a specific culture does not imply the absence of related attitudes; it merely reflects differing cultural expressions. This highlights the need to explore how

proverbs propagate gender-biased roles, as they often serve multiple functions within social contexts. This study chiefly focuses on the relationship between Punjabi proverbs and gender portrayal among the Punjabi-speaking people of village *Chack Zahir*. Specifically, the study analyzes the considerable role Punjabi proverbs play in gender portrayal and how these proverbs are being used by people of village *Chack Zahir* to explain gender relations in common conversation. This study focuses on one variety of Punjabi proverbs which are called "Akhan".

Review of Literature

The available literature was on the culture and traditions of Punjab and Punjabi proverbs were a little part of stories. After this, European authors and Christian preachers started collecting Punjabi literature that was translated into European languages in order to understand the local culture and to facilitate communication between the colonial administrators and the native people of the Punjab as Punjab was a major part of their colonial administration due to its historical and geographical importance. The literature review acknowledges some studies about proverbs started in the second half of the 20th century, including research done in American, Japanese, Korean Sudanese, and Indian contexts. Still, special research on Punjabi culture and proverbs is found in Burns (1941)¹. Some brief previews of studies of Punjabi proverbs are argued below.

Salami (2005) illustrated that writers including male and female should participate in a fundamental disassembling of male-created proverbs in the African language. They should replace them with proverbs that promote social well-being and construct positive identities for women. It is vibrant that sexism is an integral part of African literature through the usage of proverbs by modern authors. The traditional realities of their various communities through prudent selections of proverbs, metaphors, stereotypes idioms, and other verbal expressions conveyed through African Proverbs. However, it is obvious that proverbs facilitate the critical weakening of women and an over-appraisal of masculine values, In this way, proverbs are used in spreading the rejection of women in the process of decision-making among traditional African societies.

Gikuyu² oral literature explored focusing on gender by (Ghilzai et al., 2020) sheds light on subversion and resistance to male dominance in local proverbs, songs, and narratives. The analysis of these proverbs also shows resistance to the establishment of a patriarchal order. This study claims that the proverbs are primarily a male genre that often evaluates the negative characteristics of women.

Khan and Naz (2015) claim that Pashtun proverbs reflect and also propagate, perpetuate, and conserve gender bias. Further in the conclusion the study states that Pashtun proverbs represent men traditionally accepted and women in a stereotypically demeaning way. Contrary to that the Pashto proverbs corpus is separated into negative, positive, and contextual categories.

A study on Pushto proverbs by SanaUddin (2015) concluded that the studied proverbs approve a customary thought regarding the functioning of women in the communal field, support the establishment of principles of hegemonic maleness and women's sexuality, favor hostility to women, and communicate a more constructive preferences of son over daughter.

The study of Lubna & Mustafa (2017) presents an analysis of Punjabi proverbs focusing on gender. The study highlights the construction of multiple identities and claims that ideologically Punjabi proverbs are patriarchal. The study selected 588 Punjabi proverbs specially targeting women. The focus of research in this area has remained on just women, not gender. The findings reveal that the majority of selected proverbs target female characters in comparison to males. Most of the proverbs targeted women in an intimidating manner while those pointed to males were commonly positive. However, proverbs addressing mothers were mostly positive.

In their article, Khan and Awan (2017) argue that the population density of a speech community affects the negative or positive attitude toward speech. Overall Punjabi proverbs have created an image of the inclination to silence and thought, while Nigerian proverbs explained a preference for clarity, directness, and speech. In both languages overstating, backbiting, honored talk, boasting, and bitter expressions are strictly disallowed. In Yoruba proverbs, there are a significant number of proverbs about the harmful intensity of abusive words but such proverbs also strengthen the presence of an optimistic attitude towards speech in the Nigerian cultures. However, there may

¹ *Sons of the soil: Studies of the Indian cultivator*. Manager of publications, Delhi. Upadhyaya, "A general survey of folklore activities in India." *Midwest Folklore* 4.4 (1954): 201-212.

² Gikuyu or kikuyu is Banto language by the (Agĩkũyũ) of Kenya. Kikuyu or Gikuyu is spoken in the area between Nyeri and Nairobi.

possibly be several different negative and positive views of speech, the reason for evaluating speech one findings have amazing similarities with the thematic inclinations found in Punjabi and Nigerian proverbs. Several studies conducted in Pakistani, particularly in the Punjabi context focused on gender in different types of folklore however the main field did not comprehend speech or message.

Mir (2018) researched Punjabi proverbs highlighted the construction of the negative identity of women and described that negative image of women and male dominance are attached to the identity of women in Punjabi society that is evident through Punjabi proverbial language which, in a true sense labels the female gender negatively. Women are not part of the decision-making process and are dependent on men from all walks of life. Commonly gender discrimination is being faced by the female gender and they observe low self-esteem. Women consider themselves incomplete, insecure, and useless without the presence of men. Male supremacy is also exercised using proverbs. This research explores the power relations in society by male gender and female stereotypes with the help of Punjabi literature and culture. This also reflects the status of both genders in the rural settings of Punjabi society.

Khan and Awan (2019) paid close attention to the analysis of the Punjabi society that is unfair towards children in the context of gender. Patriarchal tendencies are depreciating female children and depriving them of their self-esteem and social confidence. Social institutions such as politics, marriage, economy, and adulthood are shaped under these gender-biased patterns when the social actors are just baby girls and boys. The inequality constructed and portrayed through identities based on gender is presented through such proverbs that support the girls and boys to become a socially approved behavior of women and men.

Khan (2021) published an investigation regarding the linguo-cultural analysis of Punjabi and African proverbs. The investigation of African and Punjabi cultures, through the study of proverbs, helped the researchers to establish a set of acceptable rules about creating standards and ideal cultural norms. This research is just an investigation of the common features of Punjabi and African cultures. The impacts of proverbs on gender stereotypes and gender discriminatory roles are ignored in this research. The researcher just focused on evaluating the similarities of the Punjabi and African proverbs & cultures.

Most studies have focused on the image of the woman or the unequal gender relations between men and women in Punjab, no study has engrossed on the exploration of values, interests, or needs behind the different construction of gender portrayal in Punjabi proverbs.

Theoretical Framework: Judith Butler's Theory of Gender Performativity

Judith Butler's groundbreaking work on gender performativity, particularly articulated in her seminal text "Gender Trouble" (1990), challenges traditional notions of gender as a fixed or inherent quality. Instead, Butler argues that gender is a socially constructed identity, formed through repeated actions and behaviors that are culturally dictated. This essay seeks to apply Butler's theory to the analysis of Punjabi proverbs, which, while often perceived as perpetuating patriarchal norms, also reveal a nuanced interplay of power and identity in the cultural context of Punjab. At the core of Butler's argument is the notion that gender is performative. This means that gender is not something one is, but rather something one does. The repetition of specific behaviors, language, and social roles serves to constitute and reinforce gender identities. Within this framework, Punjabi proverbs can be viewed as cultural texts that articulate and shape societal attitudes towards gender. The language used in these proverbs does not merely reflect existing norms but actively participates in constructing gender identities.

Research Objectives

1. Examine how Punjabi proverbs represent gender roles and attitudes toward men and women.
2. Analyze how the language in these proverbs shapes perceptions of gender identity within Punjabi culture.
3. Investigate how women use these proverbs to challenge gender stereotypes and assert their identities.

Research Questions

1. How do Punjabi proverbs reflect societal attitudes towards gender roles and identities?
2. In what ways does the language used in these proverbs contribute to the construction of gender identity within Punjabi culture?

3. How can women utilize Punjabi proverbs to challenge and resist traditional gender stereotypes?

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach and primary methods of data collection included **note-taking and observation during fieldwork. Forty-three (43) women-oriented proverbs were collected from five (5) women. Twenty (20) themes were generated based on the socio-cultural context as discussed by the village women participants.**

Thematic Data Analysis and Discussion: Portrayal of Women in Punjabi Proverbs

Thematic data analysis of Punjabi proverbs reveals complex portrayals of women that reflect both societal norms and cultural values. While many proverbs depict women in traditional roles, often emphasizing subservience and inferiority, others highlight their strength, wisdom, and importance within the family structure. This duality provides insight into the ways language shapes perceptions of gender identity in Punjabi culture. By examining these proverbs, we can better understand how they serve as both instruments of patriarchal ideology and potential tools for resistance, illustrating the nuanced interplay between power, identity, and cultural expression in the lives of women. Thematic analysis of women's portrayal in Punjabi proverbs is as follows:

Theme 1. Must be good at household chores.

Znani soi nal ve gher dha lindi ay ty jna kihi nal vee dhawy ty nay dhandha

(A woman can destroy her home with a needle, but a man cannot do this with his shovel).

Explanation: women are responsible for maintaining household matters and their little negligence can destroy the home while men cannot do this easily. So, women have total responsibility to keep home in a better position. It is presumed that women lack basic cognitive abilities to deal with basic household tasks. For instance,

aata gunni hildi kyn aen” (why do you move while kneading the dough?)

Wahlia runn puranyaa jogi (A woman who is free from household chores must host the guests)

Explanation: A woman must spend her time on household chores if she is free from this duty. She should bear the responsibility of hosting the guests. This means she must perform her duties in all circumstances.

Wahlia Juttia unn vailay (If a woman is free from household chores she should spin the wool)

Explanation: “*Juttia*” is a designatory word for the woman of Punjab. This proverb shows that woman of Punjab should do extra work after completing her daily life duties like cooking, cleaning house etc. Sagheer and Zubair (2020) stated that 37% of the Punjabi proverbs address married women by illustrating the positioning and predominant role of women among Punjabi families is that of a wife.

Theme 2. Carelessness

Bhukayy the dheerujia tayy pind ujatun lugia (When the daughter of a poor man becomes rich, she will destroy the village)

Explanation: when a poor lady has the right to hold the economic matters of the house, she will destroy the wealth of her husband because of her carelessness and wish to fulfill her desires.

Junj aai putun no kuchaji bathi katun no (When the guests of the groom are at the doorstep, the careless women start preparing dowry)

Explanation: Carelessness is a common trait of women. They usually start doing work at the eleventh hour.

Theme 3 Stereotypical Role of Mother-in-law

Masi sus taay nikia nikia kuss (Maternal aunt as a mother-in-law is like slow fever)

Masi bunni sus taay awnho ve piaha Dain tha chus (When maternal aunt becomes a mother-in-law, she behaves like a witch)

Explanation: The maternal aunt (sister of mother) is a very loving relation but when she becomes a mother-in-law, she becomes bad for her daughter-in-law and creates problems for her in all matters. A mother-in-law cannot be sincere with her daughter-in-law even though she is *Massi* (sister-of-mother).

Theme 4 Stereotypical role of sister-in-law

Ik nund taay soo guraa tha gund (One sister-in-law is garbage of hundred houses)

Explanation: The Sister-in-law is an unwanted person in the house because she creates problems in the house and is a cause of disturbance in family life. So, one should avoid this relationship to maintain a conducive atmosphere in the family.

Theme 5. Abusive language

Udhul gyaa noo dajj kiaha (A woman who marries without the concern and permission of her parents is not eligible for dowry)

Explanation: *Udhalun* (a woman who leaves her parents' house for her beloved) is an abusive word in the Punjabi language. A woman who selects her spouse by herself is not to be honored in society. She cannot claim any rights in inheritance and financial support from her parents.

Theme 6. Concept of Motherhood

Punjabi proverbs highly appreciate the motherhood capacities of women. The warmth, love, and care of the mother are well acknowledged in a variety of ways in Punjabi proverbs. The role of a woman as a mother has always been appreciated. Following proverbs such as.

Mawaa thundiaaa chawaa (Mothers are cool shadows)

Maa muttii the we maa hi hondi ayy (Mother is honorable even she is made of mud)

Aapay ma rujii kujii apay maray bachay jeeven (Mother needs nothing in the presence of her children)

Putraan di maa rani (Mother of sons is like a queen).

Explanation: The quoted above proverbs depict the role of women and mothers in a positive and honorable manner. Mothers of sons are mostly more valued. Without the birth of a male child, women have no worth in their family and society. Having more sons empowers the mother and bestows her higher authority and respect in Punjabi society.

Maa maary per marun na daway (A mother can beat her children by herself but does not allow others to do so).

Explanation: This proverb depicts the love of a mother for her children. She can punish her children for their betterment, but she cannot bear the harsh words for his children from others. Even though a mother cannot bear the punishment given to children by their father. Although she can bear the Physical abuse from her husband being a mother it is very difficult for her to tolerate any cruel act for her kids.

Theme 7. Role of In-Laws.

Dolii kudun maa pay thay munji kudun suhrayy (The seat of the bride will be taken out by her parents and the death bed will be taken out by her in-laws)

Explanation: A woman cannot leave her husbands 'house after marriage and she has no other place to live and accept her in-law's house till her death.

Nohh taay ghoray tha khadyaa zaiaa nahi janda (Eating of daughter-in-law and a horse does not go vain).

Explanation: The daughter-in-law spends many chores to do, so it's not useless to spend more money on her eating and health because she gives birth and fulfills other responsibilities of household chores like a horse, as a horse also spends energy and provides the facility of riding to its owner. The same goes for the daughter in law so, in in-laws should spend money on the nutrition of *Nooh* (daughter-in-law).

Aakhna nohh noo taay sunanyaa dhii noo (Speak with daughter to warn the daughter in law)

Explanation: When the mother-in-law wants to pass an ironic comment on her daughter-in-law, she speaks with her daughter to avoid any conflict at home. Because the daughter can bear the harsh words of her mother and the daughter-in-law can 'not do this. This proverb shows the strong and positive relation of mother and daughter as compared with daughter-in-law and mother-in-law.

Theme 8. Talkative

Several proverbs show the argumentative behavior of women. Such as:

Run nall muthaa lawya tayy kunaa the khair munaway (Relation with women is dangerous for hearing)

Explanation: It illustrates that whoever becomes argumentative to women has to listen a lot. In society and literature generally, women are assumed to be more talkative than men. The talkative woman is considered negatively and it is considered as a shortcoming of woman.

Salami (2005) argued that in African Proverbs a good wife is the one who does not express her sufferings in the matrimony to anyone, even not to her parents.

Theme 9. Quarrelsome

Budhii jiuindiaa nitt poyarayy (In the life of a wife, it is difficult for a man to avoid any conflict)

Explanation: “*Buddhi*” is a Punjabi word for “old lady” but sometimes it is used for the wife. In this proverb “*Buddhi*” means wife and the depiction of this proverb is, that wives are troublemakers, and it is useless to wish for peace in a male’s life in the presence of wives.

Kanii kuttii zaher the putti (Squinty girl is poisonous)

Explanation: When women have any physical disorder, they become more dangerous and quarrelsome to overcome their weakness.

Aa.nee guyandhnayy lurtya (O female neighbor let’s fight).

Explanation: when a woman is free it’s her hobby to fight with anyone if, no one is available then she enjoys fighting with female neighbors.

Such proverbs support the understanding that women are quarrelsome and social trouble-makers.

Theme 10. Extravagant

In several proverbs, women are highlighted as extravagant. For example,

Bhukavy the dheerujii tavy pind ujatun lugii (when the daughter of a poor man becomes rich, she will destroy the village).

Explanation: when a poor lady has the right to hold the economic matters of the house, she will destroy the wealth of her husband because of her carelessness and wish to fulfill her desires by all means.

Mitraa the khutii tulii awper rakhi chuttii Khawand the khuttii ltaa thuly chutti

(Earning of beloveds are value able than the earning of husband)

Explanation: “*miter*” means dost, in this proverb, the word “*mitraa*” is dedicated to the family of the woman. The meaning of this proverb is, that women feel the financial burden of their brothers and fathers, and try to control their expenditure. But when she becomes a wife, she does not care about the financial responsibilities of her husband and becomes overgenerous.

Theme 11. Unwise

Few of the proverbs exemplify women as being unintelligent, irrational, and unwise.

Runnan de mutt khurri picchay (In the Nape Women’s wits).

Explanation: “*Runn*” is a disgraceful Punjabi word for woman. This proverb tells us that women cannot understand matters because they don’t think rationally that’s why a man should keep them away from decision-making in all matters.

Theme 12. Ineligible

Ukhi dussay naa te naa noor bharr (Unable to see anything but the name is” full of light”).

Explanation:

This is a mocking example of a woman who believes herself as competent and trustworthy. The proverb describes that women exaggerate and lie about their status and beauty. Women are not pushed to take part in the process of decision-making even if it is related to them.

Theme 13. Unreliable

zanaani nu bhed naa devo (Do not share a secret with women).

Explanation Perception of a woman is that she is unreliable whose actions may be harmful to others. Men are socially restricted from sharing any confidential information or their secrets with women. This shows the lack of or low level of credibility of women who are unable to maintain confidentiality which is generally associated with the characteristics of men. The following proverb is advice for men.

Putli nar khaway char khavand aakhy mare surphay dar

(Slim woman eats four tortilla husbands consider her a selfless)

Explanation: Men are innocent they cannot understand the tricks of women and women try to pretend themselves weak, needy, and innocent in front of their husbands.

Theme 14. Role of daughter-in-law

Putur howay chungaa noo latayy kiha ghiw ho way mithi taay rotii satay kihia

(If the Son is nice there is no reason to fight of daughter-in-law, if the wheat is sweat, it is impossible for bread to burn)

Explanation: If the son is obedient to his parents, the daughter-in-law cannot make any disputes in the house and she is also obedient to her in-laws like the bread of sweet wheat which doesn’t burn easily as a daughter-in-law’s good behavior is dependent on the behavior of his husband with his own family.

Theme 15. Bad examples of using female identity words

Khan and Ali (2017) argued that in Punjabi proverbs the women are depicted as and associated with insects, and animals, and are even inanimate objects to dehumanize and objectify them.

Liari gai dudh chwan taay phunder gai lutta bhanan

(Milk-giving buffalo goes for milking and without having milking ability it is useless for buffalo to go anywhere)

Explanation: It is said that unnecessary interference of an irrelevant person who cannot solve the problem but due to his /her habit cannot avoid interference in the matters of others.

Kutii choraa nal rul gyi (Bitch befriends thieves)

Explanation: This is used in case of facing decisiveness from loyal ones or unreliability of family members or friends.

Zatt thi koth kirli taay chatheera noo juphay (Lizard by caste and trying to live in high pillars)

Explanation: It is said for the person who belongs to a cheap family and trying to be honorable.

Theme 16. Vulgar language for female

Chus laindi kutii truk thulay aagai (A Bitch seeking pleasure met an accident with truck)

Jithay thi khotii othay aan khaloti (The hinny reaches where it belongs)

Budhii cunjrii taay tailay tha ujataa (Make up is useless for an old dancer)

Duryaay Sindh kunjri wangoo (Sindh River is like a dancer woman)

Explanation: These proverbs represent that the use of female identity words like “*khoti, Kuttii, Kunjri*” is a way to humiliate women. The men do not say “*khotaa, kunjer, kutta*” for instance.

Chus lainda kutaa truk thulay aagaia.

Jithay tha khotaa othay aan khalota.

Duryaay Sindh kunjri wangoo.

Theme 17. False objections on female

Aataa gundhi hildii kioo ayyi (Why are you moving while kneading the dough?)

Explanation: Women face false objections from their in-laws and husbands and they cannot avoid it. They are being targeted in their work to degrade them.

Theme 18. Subordination of Women:

Sae day munn bhani, tay kani v rani” (If the woman pleases her husband’s heart, she is a queen even if she is one-eyed).

Explanation: This proverb reinforces the subordinate position of women to men. This glorifies the status of wives who are accepted by their husbands. Achieving the appreciation of the husband reflects the most important victory for a wife.

Theme 19. Concept of daughter

Dhee praya dhunn” (Daughter is a treasure that belongs to others),

Dheeyan jamdiyan paraiyan” (Daughters are outsiders since birth)

Explanation Daughter's birth in the family increases the financial burden and paves the way for poverty in the family. Daughters are perceived as temporary residents and guests of the family.

Dhiyaan tun ahi dhiyan de leykhan tu darr lagdaae” (Not the daughters but rather their destiny which makes (parents) feel afraid).

Explanation: This is a famous proverb. It is a commonly believed proverb that shows that parents of daughters fear their daughter's fate and they are in a weaker position in society as they are the parents of daughters. My daughters are allied with tension and insecurity.

Theme 20. Not tolerable without children

Phunddar majj qasiyan jogi” (A buffalo who cannot give birth must be given to the butcher)

Explanation: It is used to denote an infertile woman who is unproductive in giving birth to a child. It conveys the meaning that an infertile buffalo should be handed over to a butcher as she has no utility. Similarly, an infertile woman should be left as she has no utility if she cannot conceive. It is considered the prime duty of women to give birth to children. Infertility is perceived as a curse.

Conclusion

The analysis of Punjabi proverbs provides a nuanced understanding of gender representation and the complexities surrounding the portrayal of women in Punjabi culture. While many proverbs reinforce traditional views that depict women as inferior or subordinate, they also highlight the importance of maternal figures and the wisdom inherent in female experiences. This duality illustrates how language not only reflects societal attitudes but also shapes and constructs gender identities. Furthermore,

proverbs can serve as vehicles for empowerment, allowing women to assert their identities and challenge prevailing stereotypes. By employing Judith Butler's theory of performativity, this study underscores the dynamic relationship between language and gender, revealing that proverbs are not merely instruments of oppression but also potential tools for resistance. Ultimately, a deeper exploration of these cultural expressions invites a broader discourse on gender dynamics, encouraging a reevaluation of how language influences perceptions of identity and power within Punjabi society.

Recommendation

Future research could benefit from exploring the portrayal of gender in proverbs across different cultural contexts within South Asia. By comparing Punjabi proverbs with those from other languages and regions, researchers can identify shared themes and unique variations in gender representation. Additionally, investigating the impact of modernization on Punjabi proverbs could provide valuable insights into their evolving meanings and usage. Understanding these dynamics can reveal how changing perceptions of gender are reflected in language and cultural expressions, ultimately contributing to a more comprehensive view of gender representation in Punjabi culture and beyond.

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