

Gender Bias in Malay Language

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Abstract—Language reflects the speakers of a community. The characteristics and background of an individual or society are assessed through the spoken word and forms of language. There have been many studies conducted by scholars who study foreign languages (particularly English and European languages as spoken in the United States of America (USA), Germany and Norway). The Chinese language has also been assessed by a number of scholars. Many sexist elements have been found in the Chinese language (in particular, in older forms of the language.) Unfortunately, even many language users agree that male terms sometimes fail to be gender-neutral and may therefore be a cause of sex bias as well as a vestige of past inequality, few studies have been conducted that serve to highlight the sexist elements of the Malay language. In this paper, proverbs with sexist elements will be discussed to prove that the said elements do exist in Malay language.

Index Terms—Gender-bias, malay language, malay proverbs, sexist.

I. SEXIST LANGUAGE

Anne Pauwels [1] defines sexist language as that which reflects a “biasness” or unbalanced attitude towards a particular gender. According to the author, this attitude usually leans towards unfair treatment of women and gives more prominence to men. In many international languages, men or maleness is assumed to be the norm for the human race. Male characteristics, actions, thoughts and beliefs are regarded as representative of all matters pertaining to humankind in general. This in turn has led to the “disappearance” of women in language. Whenever it occurs, their “appearance” is regarded as a deviation from the norm in which “men” are equated with the entire human race.

Sexist elements in a language refers to those nouns, phrases, sentences or proverbs which hold negative or bad connotation for individuals of a particular gender, i.e men or women. The use of such language perpetuates negative stereotypes and social values which discredit or demean a particular gender. Pam Peters [2], defines sexist language as language which either disregards or disparages a particular gender. Based on social history, this commonly refers to a language which emphasises a male-dominated world, where men are considered the true being, and women are portrayed as impalpable entities.

Due to the prevalence of such bias, the subsequent unfair treatment of women, and the different forms this discrimination has taken over the years, scholars have

ascribed varying and definitions to sexist language. Kristen Gomard [3] for example, listed the attributes of sexist language as:

- 1) Language which treats or regards women and men as asymmetrical.
- 2) Language that dismisses women.
- 3) Language that condemns or criticise women.
- 4) Language that stereotypes the female gender (as the weaker sex, as the group who is assigned to serve in the kitchen or as the home maker and the like).

II. SEXIST ELEMENTS IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE (EL)

Sexist elements are evident in several aspects of the English Language. In this section, sexist elements are apparent in each component of language

A. Words

Words which contain sexist elements and non- sexist alternatives:

TABLE I: NON-SEXIST ALTERNATIVES

Word	Proposed Alternative
Chairman	chairperson
businessman	entrepreneur / executive
founding fathers	founders / pioneers
forefathers	ancestors / forebears
cameraman	camera operator
workman	worker
mankind	the human race / humanity
man-made	artificial/ manufactured
manpower	work force

The use of adjectives differ for men and women. In such instances, it is common for the weaker form of an adjective and words that have a negative connotation to be attributed to women and those that carry more positive connotations to be ascribed to men. For example:

TABLE II: ADJECTIVES FOR MALE AND FEMALE [4]

Male	Female
forceful	pushy
strong	domineering
assertive	aggressive
expressive	emotional
angry	hysterical
firm	stubborn
cautious	timid

Further, there are also semantic indications of a lowering of status in the meaning of words that are typically used to refer to women. In contrast, the corresponding words for men retain their original meaning without inferring any negative connotation. For example, words such as master, mister and

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sir have retained their meanings without any derogative nuances, whereas words which refer to women such as miss, madam and mistress have undergone expansion in terms of their meaning. In particular, miss also means “prostitute”, madam means “a woman who runs a house of prostitution”, and mistress means “a kept woman” [5].

B. Sentences

In many sentences, male terms dominate references to the neutral gender. For example:

- Somebody forgot his book.
- A lecturer should prepare his class well.
- A child learns his first words around the age one.

It is clear from the above sentences that where no reference is made to a particular gender, the possessive pronoun his is used as the neutral form. This matter has attracted the attention of many language scholars/linguists, especially those advocating the use of language which is not biased towards any particular gender. Due to increasing awareness, there are now more English language speakers who use the plural form “their” or both “his/her” for sentences such as the above. For example:

- Somebody forgot their book.
- Lecturers should prepare their class well. / A lecturer should prepare his or her class well.
- Children learn their first words around the age one. / A child learns his or her words around the age one.
- The use of plural form is thought to address the problem of inequality [6] while avoiding a degree of awkwardness arising from the use of both male and female terms. For example:
- Someone has left his make-up in the washroom [7].

C. Common Stereotypes against Women

Pauwels provided several examples of sentences used in speeches and written material to depict stereotypes against women, namely:

- A Brunswick mother of four has been appointed to the board.
- Academics have wives and children to support.
- The premier and his attractive blond wife..... [8].
- The above examples show gender role stereotypes which presume all academicians to be male and implies that “a mother of four children” should not be holding a certain profession.

It is clear that reference to the physical attributes or physiognomy of the woman in the above sentence is irrelevant to the context. While sexist elements are certainly prevalent in the English language, other languages are not exempt from similar criticism. The Chinese language in particular has a number of sexist elements.

III. SEXIST ELEMENTS IN THE CHINESE LANGUAGE

Sexist elements in the Chinese language are particularly apparent in nicknames and expletives.

According to Ng Bee Chin and Kate Burridge [9], 90% of words and phrases which refer to radical women contain either semantically negative elements or portray a stereotypical image of the women as “wild” and “destructive”.

The status of women in society in the early days was expressly portrayed in two books, namely “Lienuzhuan” (The Biographies of Women) written during the Western Han Dynasty (206 B.C. – 12 A.D.), and “Nujie” (Admonishments for Women) written during the Eastern Han Dynasty (25-221 A.D.). In these books, the writers provided strict guidelines and a “moral code of conduct” for women to study and follow. The authors went so far as to say that all women should model themselves based on the teachings of these books. Not surprisingly, the writers of both works were male, and they emphasised ideas such as, “nan yiciang weigui” and “nu yi ruo wei mei” which means that “the value in a man is his strength, while the beauty in a women is her weakness”. Unfortunately, such prescribed notions of women’s roles have persisted.

Currently, most nouns in the Chinese language refer to the male gender, and the male term is the default term used to denote the neutral gender. Word forms which refer to women are derived from the male or neutral gender. For example:

TABLE III: FEMALES DERIVATIVES IN CHINESE [10]

Neutral/ Male	Meaning	Female	Meaning
Yu sheng	doctor	nu yusheng	lady doctor
Jingli	manager	nu jingli	lady manager

Many names contain distinct “masculine” or “feminine” connotations and children are named according to cultural notions of gender. Names for females are usually derived from words associated with flowers, beauty and softness, while names for males portray success, prosperity, greatness and brilliance. For example:

TABLE IV: MEANING OF NAMES IN THE CHINESE LANGUAGE [11]

Names for women		Names for men	
Pinyin	Meaning	Pinyin	Meaning
mei	beauty	qiang	strength
jing	silence	long	prosperity
fen	fragrance	yao	intelligence
yan	cloud	chen	success

In the Chinese language, nicknames given to women who are unmarried also portray sexist elements. A matured woman who is not yet married is frequently referred to as laochunu, which literally means “old virgin”, or ganmianbao which means “dried-up bread”. According to Ng and Burridge [12], such words are overly negative and carry connotation of bitterness, frigidity, disappointment and unattractiveness. Meanwhile, words used to refer to men who are unmarried include wanglaowu which means “old single eligible man”; or danshen han or guang gun which literally means “rod” or “pole” which have a positive connotations of high status or independence within the Chinese community.

IV. EXAMPLES IN OTHER LANGUAGES

In the Japanese language, women use the particle “ne” at the end of a sentence. The pronoun for females in Japanese is “watasi” whereas for men it is “wasi”. Among the Araucanian Indians in Chile, women are expected to be silent while men are encouraged to express their opinions in every situation

[13].

The aborigines in Australia, Maya, Zulu and Mongolia have taboo words that cannot be uttered by women and have a variation in language which women are not permitted to use. These groups commonly restrict women's use of words pertaining to titles or hunting or matters concerning religion. Even words which sounds similar to such words are forbidden for female use. In a situation where there are both men and women, only men are supposed to speak and women are expected to be silent. If they have to speak, they should whisper. Further, in a conversation which includes both genders - men are expected to talk more than women and the content of male conversation is supposed to be serious. Acceptable topics include competition, sports, violence and politics. In contrast, women's conversations are supposed to revolve around matters of the heart including the self, relationships, household and family.

From the above examples, it is clear that the linguistic status of women depends on the more autonomous masculine form. By relegating women to the subordinate position of a "dependent", sexist language prevents women from being portrayed as equal to men. However, Hellinger [14] points out that there are exceptions and nuances in every language's treatment of women. The terminology individuals use to refer to men and women is very much impacted by their upbringing as well as the views of their larger community of origin.

We now turn to the Malay language and ask if it too contains similarly sexist elements. A substantial number of the words that appear in the "Kamus Dewan" (Malay dictionary published by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Malaysia) and in a number of important Malay literary works are observed to contain sexist elements. Malay proverbs in particular carry a disproportionate number of sexist connotations.

V. SEXIST ELEMENTS IN THE MALAY LANGUAGE

Unfortunately, few studies have been conducted that serve to highlight the sexist elements of the Malay language. One such attempt was conducted by Teo Kok Seong [15]. In this paper, proverbs with sexist elements will be discussed to prove that the elements do exist in Malay language.

A. Malay Proverb

Proverbs are groups of words arranged in such a way to provide a veiled or implicit meaning that has connotations of popular wisdom. Words are put together poetically to convey an idea (e.g., a desire, a thought or advice) that is often concealed in some way, and whose meaning cannot always be taken literally.

Malay proverbs addressing issues related to women typically contain negative components that demean the status of women. The words chosen to form such proverbs which refer to women tend to be distinctly negative. Listed below are Malay proverbs which contain such sexist elements.

1) Proverbs with women symbolising / representing negative actions or traits

Negative traits are found in either the words used in coining the proverbs or the meaning depicted. Below are examples of

the proverbs with the meanings and the literal translation.

Proverb: Hendak memakan kecundang orang

Literal translation: Desiring to eat or enjoy something which has been bitten or used by others.

Meaning: Desiring to marry a divorcee / "used" woman.

Proverb: Bagai biawak mengulangi bangkai / Lalat langau mengerumuni bangkai

Literal Translation: Like an iguana going back to a carcass/ Bluebottle fly infesting a carcass

Meaning: Men jostling towards the house of a woman of ill-repute

(Note: women in the above proverbs are referred as 'carcass')

Proverb: Beban sudah di pintu / Beban sudah dekat untuk dibawa

Literal Translation: A burden has arrived at the door / A burden is close to be carried away

Meaning: A daughter who has reached marriageable age

(Note: a daughter in the above proverbs are referred to as 'burden')

Proverb: Bagai emak mandul baru beranak.

Literal Translation: Like a barren woman who at length has just given birth.

Meaning: A state of boundless joy and happiness.

Proverb: Bagai cacing gila

Literal Translation: Like a worm gone mad.

Meaning: A woman who likes going out / visiting the homes of others.

Proverb: Bagai harimau beranak muda.

Literal Translation: Like a tigress conceiving at a tender age.

Meaning: A woman who is overly fierce

Proverb: Jangan berebut-rebut tembikar pecah

Literal Translation: Do not scramble for broken porcelain.

Meaning: Do not fight over a bad woman who cannot change her ways and who is not fit to be made one's wife.

Proverb: Meriba puan kosong

Literal Translation: To hold a worthless woman on the lap
Meaning: To marry a single woman, who unbeknownst to others, has lost her virginity.

Proverb: Anjing mengulangi bangkai

Literal Translation: A dog going back to a carcass.

Meaning: An immoral man who frequents prostitutes or women of ill-repute

(Note: ill repute women referred as 'carcass')

Proverb: Permata cacat

Literal Translation: A flawed (handicapped) gemstone

Meaning: A young single woman who has been deflowered.

Proverb: Buah macang dimakan kelarah, di luar baik busuk di dalam.

Literal Translation: A mango infested by fruit worm. It looks good on the outside, but is rotten on the inside

Meaning: A woman who is bad and sullied, and looks good only on the outside.

Proverb: Bersalai tidak berapi.

Literal Translation: Smoking without a fire.

Meaning: A woman who is not yet married but is already pregnant.

Proverb: Berteras ke hujung dahan.

Literal Translation: Holding on to the tip of a branch.
Meaning: A husband who is henpecked by his wife.
Proverb: Di cecah orang bagai garam.
Literal Translation: Being dipped like salt.
Meaning: A woman who is married for very short period and then gets divorced.
Proverb: Biduk satu nakhoda dua
Literal Translation: One boat two captains.
Meaning: A woman who cheats on her husband; one in her deeds, two on his heads/ A woman who keeps two boyfriends/ a married woman who still has an affair with another man
Proverb: Bomoh mencari orang sakit.
Literal Translation: A faith healer seeking patients.
Meaning: A woman in search of a husband; parents who 'parade' their daughter in search of a husband for her.
Proverb: Bagai kena sentung pelalai.
Literal Translation: To be cast under a spell which makes a woman unable to get suitors.
Meaning: A young girl who does not want to get married.
Proverb: Bagai kucing takut akan balur.
Literal Translation: Like a cat fearful of dried meat.
Meaning: A man who is afraid of a woman.
Proverb: Umpama buah kepayang, dimakan mabuk dibuang sayang
Literal Translation: Like the kepayang* fruit, intoxicating to the taste, and yet to throw it away would be a waste. (* a species of forest fruit which has no English equivalence)
Meaning: To court a lovely women of ill-repute who is bound to leave one with a broken heart, but with whom one is loath to part.
Proverb: Keli dua selubang.
Literal Translation: Two catfish in one hole.
Meaning: A woman who has two lovers.
Proverb: Bagai anak dara sudah berlaki.
Literal Translation: A young/single maiden who behaves as married woman
Meaning: A shameless, slothful and shabby young woman who has a roving eye.
Proverb: Terjerit-jerit bagai kucing biang.
Literal Translation: Shrieking like a lascivious cat.
Meaning: A woman who does not restrain herself nor her expressions (a woman who is unable to keep her voice down).
Proverb: Ternanti-nanti bagai berlakikan raja
Literal Translation: To wait anxiously/ endlessly as if (she is) marrying a prince
Meaning: Waiting for a long time help/assistance from someone who is swamped with work / A woman who desires someone who does not reciprocate her feelings.
Proverb: Dikembar seperti benang.
Literal Translation: Twined like a yarn
Meaning: A woman who cheats on her husband.
Proverb: Enau mencari sigai.
Literal Translation: Sugar palm seeking a ladder.
Meaning: A woman who goes searching for a male partner.

2) *Proverbs containing stereotypes against women*
Women are often stereotyped as a chatterbox, homemaker, ill-mannered, enjoy nagging etc. below are proverbs which portray women with the said characteristics.
Proverb: Kasihkan anak, tangan-tangankan, kasihkan bini

tinggal-tinggalkan.
Literal Translation: If you love your children, beat and discipline them, if you love your wife, leave her every now and then
Meaning: A child who is cosseted and a wife who is overly pampered may one day take you for granted and in the end cause you much grief.
Proverb: Bagai murai dicabut ekor.
Literal Translation: Like a magpie having its tail plucked
Meaning: A woman who likes to talk and gossip (a chatterbox).
Proverb: Bagai itik pulang petang
Literal Translation: Like a duck waddling home late at dusk.
Meaning: Walking in a very slow manner (referring to a woman who is obese).
Proverb: Ada wang abang sayang, tak ada wang abang melayang.
Literal Translation: If (a man) has money, he will be loved (by a woman); if he is penniless, he will be thrown away / No money, no honey
Meaning: A women's love is conditional upon the man's wealth.
Proverb: Seperti anjing yang sudah biasa makan tahi, bagaimana sekalipun diberi makan yang baik, hendak juga memakan tahi.
Literal Translation: Even if served good food, a dog which is accustomed to eating faeces will choose faeces over food.
Meaning: It is difficult to change a woman who is used to her evil ways.
(note: Women referred to as dog which is accustomed to eating faeces)
Proverb: Kain dalam acar dikutip dicuci dia hendak ke longkang juga.
Literal Translation: No matter how much a soiled piece of cloth (picked up from the drain) is washed, it still hankers for the gutter.
Meaning: It would be difficult to change a woman who is used to her evil ways.
Proverb: Lidah perempuan itu ialah senjatanya yang tiada dibiarkannya berkarat.
Literal Translation: A woman's tongue is a weapon which she will never allow to go rusty.
Meaning: A woman who uses her tongue as a weapon, will over time become adept in quarrelling and nagging.
Proverb: Senyum perempuan yang elok paras itu tangis kendi wang kamu (laki-laki).
Literal Translation: The smile of a beautiful woman will cause a man's wallet to cry.
Meaning: Many men lose their wealth because of beautiful women, especially beautiful women who are cunning.
Proverb: Cerdik perempuan meleburkan, saudagar muda menghutangkan
Literal Translation: The guile of a woman is destructive, leaving a young man destitute
Meaning: To follow someone (women) blindly without giving careful thought and consideration brings about grief and suffering.
Derogatory Proverbs that demean the status of women
Proverb: Lesung mencari alu / Telaga mendapatkan timba/

Ulam mencari sambal

Literal Translation: Mortar goes searching for a pestle / A well goes searching for the bucket/ Salad that go searching for condiments

Meaning: Forward girls who seek a male partner.

(Note: In the Malay community, normally the men will propose or look for a female partner. On the other hand, if the woman was the one initiated a relationship with man, it is considered as against the norm.)

Proverb: Kepala rebah mata melayang, bantal bangkit main wayang / Mata tidur bantal berjaga/ Mata kejam bantal membuat ragam

Literal Translation: Head falls, eyes dream away, pillow rises in shadow play / Eyes asleep, pillow awakens / Eyes shut, pillow comes alive.

Meaning: A woman who commits adultery and whose husband remains unaware or negligent.

Proverb: Enau sebatang dua siginya / Pelesit dua sejinjang / Gajah seekor, gembala dua/ Perahu satu dua nakhodanya.

Literal Translation: A stick of sugar palm with two points/ One demon two chiefs / One elephant, two shepherds/ One boat, two captains.

Meaning: A woman who cheats on her husband/ a women with two different lovers.

Proverb: Berlaki anak semang.

Literal Translation: Being married to the son of the servant

Meaning: A woman of ill-repute.

Proverb: Bagai gagak menggonggong telur.

Literal Translation: Like a crow holding onto an egg in its beak.

Meaning: An ugly woman garbed in fine clothes

Proverb: Bagai anjing beranak enam.

Literal Translation: Like a bitch giving birth to six puppies

Meaning: A woman who has become thin and scrawny as a result of repeatedly conceiving and giving birth.

(Note: Women referred to as bitch)

Proverb: Beranak tiada berbidan

Literal Translation: Giving birth to a child without a mid-wife.

Meaning: To suffer a hardship due to one's own foolishness.

Proverb: Leka sentiasa di lipatan sanggul, fikiran singkat akal pun tumpul

Literal Translation: Distracted by the chignon, the mind can neither think nor reason.

Meaning: Spending too much time with a woman is a senseless preoccupation which will destroy the purity of mind and will make one foolish or stupid

Proverb: Umpama si gadis jolong bersubang

Literal Translation: Like a tall girl wearing earrings.

Meaning: An ostentatious act to show off newly acquired riches, wealth and status.

Proverb: Bagai anak dara mabuk andam.

Literal Translation: Like a young maiden obsessed with the bride's fringe on her forehead

Meaning: Someone who looks exhausted and listless but who is not suffering from any illness.

Proverb: Janda belum berlaki.

Literal Translation: To be a divorcee/widow without being married

Meaning: A woman who has been left behind by her lover

3) *Idioms that are not directed at women but that use negative female references to make a point*

Proverb: Membilang kepala bini (orang bini-binian) beranak tak boleh disuruh

Literal Translation: A man (who likes to marry more than one wife) can count the number of wives he has but he cannot force them to conceive.

Meaning: An unstable and temporary job that will not bring much gain

Proverb: Bagai perempuan membawa perut.

Literal Translation: Like a woman with a huge stomach / pregnant.

Meaning: A person who has a paunch or beer/ pot belly.

Proverb: Bagai bunyi perempuan di air.

Literal Translation: Like the noises women make when they are bathing by the river.

Meaning: Noisy din

Idioms that imply that women are unimportant

Proverb: Hilang bini boleh dicari, hilang budi badan celaka

Literal Translation: You can replace a wife you have lost, but if you lose your good manners, you will suffer for it.

Meaning: One should always have positive thoughts as it will bring about goodness and charitable action, for without it, all things evil will come to you.

Proverb: Jangan berkemudi di haluan.

Literal Translation: Do not steer the ship from the bow

Meaning: Do not be subjugated by orders of your wives or women

Proverb: Timur beralih sebelah barat.

Literal Translation: The east has shifted to the west

Meaning: A man who follows a woman's orders.

Proverb: Berkemudi di haluan bergilir ke buritan

Literal Translation: From the bow the ship steered, from the stern it follows.

Meaning: A father who obeys his child's counsel, or a husband who obeys his wife's orders/instructions.

Proverb: Apa sakit berbini janda, anak tiri boleh disuruh.

Literal Translation: What is the harm in marrying a divorcee/widow, the stepchildren can be asked to run errands.

Meaning: Providing a poor excuse for one's behaviour that seeks to hide one's real intentions.

4) *References to women which are contextually irrelevant*

Proverb: Bagai menunjukkan ilmu kepada orang menetek
Literal Translation: Displaying knowledge/wisdom to a woman who breastfeeds/ nursing

Meaning: To do something which is not worthwhile.

Proverb: Bagai perempuan bunting mendapat idamannya.

Literal Translation: Like a pregnant woman whose craving is fulfilled.

Meaning: Being happy because one has obtained the object of one's desire.

Proverb: Cerdik perempuan meleburkan, saudagar muda menghutangkan

Literal Translation: The guile of a woman is destructive, leaving a young man destitute.

Meaning: To follow someone blindly without giving careful thought and consideration brings about grief and suffering.

Proverb: Baik jadi ayam betina supaya selamat.

Literal Translation: It is better to be a hen (rather than a rooster) so that one is safe / so as to be safe

Meaning: Do not show off your courage lest you attract danger and cause yourself harm.

It is clear from the proverbs quoted above that sexist elements can be found in many Malay proverbs. In addition to proverbs, there are also many words and sentences in other literary works, such as the Kamus Dewan (Malay dictionary) that also contain sexist elements.

VI. CONCLUSION

Many who advocate non-sexist language are accused of being either “facist” or “feminist”. In spite of this, much effort has been undertaken in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Norway, Germany and other countries to eradicate sexism from common language use. In Australia, for example, this awareness is manifested in different ways, and has even received the attention of the government. For example, in Section 86 (1) of the 1984 Act on sexual discrimination, it is firmly and explicitly stated that it is an offence for users/speakers of language to use language which contains discriminatory elements in advertisements for job vacancies. The Federal and state governments have also removed sexist elements from legal language and introduced guidelines for non-sexist language. Presently, many public and private sector organisations adhere to language guidelines that forbid the use of sexist elements. This includes the various broadcasting bodies, the Australian chamber of commerce, educational institutions and various publishing and media houses.

Likewise, it is the responsibility of all involved in the use of the Malay language, as well as the those involved in coining of terminologies to be sensitive in ensuring that the language does not contain sexist elements. The following are some steps that can be immediately taken:

- Malay language writers should always be sensitive to subtle forms of sexism to ensure a fair portrayal of men and women in their work.
- Users of the Malay language should avoid the use of words which contain sexist elements. For example, the word “bumiputera” (“sons of the soil”) can be substituted with the word “peribumi” (“people of the soil”).
- If a woman and a man have the same or similar attributes, the adjective used to refer to each party should be balanced.
- References towards the character, face or looks of a person should be made only if it is relevant in the context of the discussion.

With the cooperation and effort of all parties, a fair linguistic portrayal of both male and female genders can be achieved.

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