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Ideological representations of women in Jordanian folk proverbs from the perspective of cultural semiotics

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This study analyses the semiotics of proverbs by presenting the ideological portrayals of women in Jordanian folk proverbs. The content analysis of the proverbs shows that women are represented both positively and negatively, though they are preponderantly depicted negatively in the majority of the analysed proverbs. They are represented negatively as a symbol of feebleness, foolishness, disgrace, cunning, deception, jealousy and reproduction. Few are the proverbs that elevate the status of women, and if they do, it is on the condition that they are confined to particular restricted gender roles, such as mothers, sisters, wives and daughters providing kindness, help, motivation, and comfort to others. The findings uncover how socially dominant ideologies can influence the way power is practiced in the context of gender relations. They also show the immense significance of such proverbs as a social discourse that has been long used for perpetuating gendered roles and constructing and interpreting related realities, thus affecting social structures and relationships. The inferiority of women constitutes the basis of their assigned roles and responsibilities in various life domains. The proverbs have the ideological indexicals of underestimating women, showing their position in society and also reminding them of their roles.

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Introduction and theoretical framework

Language has become the most significant semiotic system due to its distinct, infinite, human, interactive and functional potential (Daramola 2013; Wąsik 2023). As important language aspects and cultural tools, proverbs are a widely used linguistic phenomenon abstracting ideas through condensed phraseology and reflecting wisdom, thoughts, morals, traditions, social norms, and viewpoints (Ghafoori and Elyas 2022). They are simple, concise, concrete and conventional statements that are formulated based on common sense or experience and are often metaphorical and use formulaic language collectively forming a genre of folklore. Therefore, Hussein (2021) argues that semiotics can be used to analyze proverbs as a discourse type that demands high cognitive abilities to extract the realist implications from the context.

Considering proverbs as not only linguistic but also socio-cultural phenomena, the present study has adopted the Bakhtinian Semiotic Theory (BST) since it can elucidate the underlying relation of proverbs to culture representing them as typical ideological signs. According to BST, utterances are viewed as typical ideological signs and since “proverbs are special utterances...can therefore function as ideological signs” (Zhao 2012, p.2073). Proverbs are viewed as indexicals reflecting the perceptions and traits of cultures, the underlying taboos and anchored stereotypes (Esimaje et al. 2014). The entirety of the human brain’s reflection and refraction of social reality is known as ideology which is affected by deeply ingrained cultural patterns including world perspectives, values and belief systems (Zhao 2012). This means that ideological signs are representations of cultural signs. In other words, folk proverbs reveal many cultural conceptions which penetrate people’s consciousness to shape their minds and influence their behaviour.

Bakhtin (1986) emphasizes the social aspect of such ideological signs, believing that they are made for serving certain interactional functions such as reflecting the social perception of gender relations and the sexist ideologies around the world. The most popular proverbs in circulation are those that describe gender and show the different natures of each of them. Gender has been a controversial topic in linguistics and is highly prominent in societies that preserve males’ and females’ positions, supposed responsibilities and normative behavioral traits (Al-Khawaldeh and Abu Rahmeh 2022; Campion 2020; Aragbuwa and Omotunde 2022; Al-Khawaldeh et al. 2023a, 2023b; Irshad and Yasmin 2023; Liu et al. 2023; Lütkevitte 2023). Jordan is such a tribal community that is characterized by certain norms and traditions that need to be considered in speech and conduct. Several issues have emerged owing to the long-held conception of gender differences in language usage. Women and men speak differently; women’s style of talking is considered to be inferior and powerless (Lakoff 1975; Suwastini et al. 2023). Languages are rich in proverbs which differ in their structure and the issues they represent. Concerning both proverbs and gender, each society has its distinctive proverbial expressions of gender differences in speech and actions.

Therefore, the study also draws insights from the Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) as another appropriate analytical approach. FCDA is based on the principle that significant notions of power, gender, and ideology have become more subtle and intricate (Lazar 2007). These notions that are related to social problems are recreated and enacted in discourse in a way that may be implicit (Fairclough and Wodak 1997; Van Dijk 2001). Proverbs present a good example of a complex and subtle type of discourse that may result in different interpretations, ambiguous meanings and opaque and subtle ideological underpinnings. Therefore, they may maintain long-held unequal discriminating gendered social ideologies which FCDA criticizes. Thus, FCDA is

mainly a Critical Discourse Analysis CDA but from a feminist viewpoint. Building on the CDA’s principles, which make “hidden agendas” such as those of discrimination, dominance, power differentials, and gender inequalities of discourse explicit (Wodak 2002; Litosseliti 2006). Therefore, Ennaji (2008) called for investigating proverbs to understand how gender is created and retained in society.

In light of the plethora of research concentrating on proverbs (Migdadi et al. 2023), their focus is different and few studies so far have concentrated on gender differences in proverbs and few have been done on Jordanian folk proverbs (Al-Mahadin 2003; Al Muhiesen and Al-Harashseh 2015; Olusola 2020; Shahzadeh 2020). Proverbs in the Jordanian context have been investigated in terms of syntactic features (Jaradat 2007), translating difficulties (Al-Azzam 2018), psycholinguistics (Dabaghi et al. 2010), figurative and symbolic (Badarneh 2016). Despite their frequent use and significance in the Jordanian context, none of the previous studies has touched upon the crucial notion of gender stereotypical representations in Jordanian folk proverbs.

Objectives and significance of the study. Hence, this study endeavours to fill this research gap by analyzing the main attributions attached to women in Jordanian folk proverbs. It mainly shows the ideological representations of women in Jordanian folk proverbs from the perspective of cultural semiotics. It is anticipated that this study could enrich the literature on proverbs by enhancing a general understanding of the theoretical and practical aspects of Jordanian folk proverbs. It shows the role proverbs play in establishing and reinforcing specific images, cultural symbols, and stereotypes because they have an inherited intellectual content. Their widespread usage contributes to the perpetuation of certain images in people’s minds regarding specific ideas and beliefs. Frequently using proverbs could indicate generalization that leads to stereotyping and consolidating the image. This study gives readers wider insights into the Jordanian’s tendencies to use these proverbs as part of their daily communications. It also serves as a useful guide for further comparative proverbs-based studies (i.e. feminine proverbs and masculine proverbs) as well as opening other avenues of research for others who are interested in this linguistic strategy and any similar or related topics.

Literature review

Research shows that women’s roles have been emphasized in folk literature (Budidarma et al. 2023; Haber 2023). Some fundamental ideas of passivity, beauty, evil, kindness and power have served as the foundation for women’s representation in folk literature. Such themes have been frequently debated through various representations of women across cultures (Budidarma et al. 2023; Roberts et al. 2023). The stereotypical representations of women through various characters (e.g. a witch, a lover, a maid, a queen, a princess and stepmother etc.) reflect their images and role in their real societies. However, all these stereotypical representations of women in literature have been tackled by the feminist movement (Lucas and Ordeniza 2023; Tomić 2023).

Research has also accentuated the significance of proverbs as a genre of folklore and social discourse (Neelam and Muhammad 2023). Numerous studies have revealed the close relationship between power, ideology, and proverbs (Garrido 2001; Van Dijk 2001; Fairclough 2003). For example, Al-Zubaidi (2019) investigated the representations of women and their position in the discourse practices of Iraqi folk proverbs. Personal rather than physical features are the most prominent properties negatively representing Iraqi women. Traditional notions such as hegemonic

Table 1 Proverbs representing women as a symbol of kindness, devotion, motivation and help.

اللى يسعدھا زمانھا تجيب بناتها قدام صبيانها
 البيت اللى ما فيه بنات ما فيه حنانين
 اللى ماله أم عيشته بتغم
 المرأة الطيبة عنوان البيت

A woman who has good luck gives birth to her daughters before her sons.
 The home without daughters has no affection.
 The one who does not have a mother, his life is sad.
 The virtuous woman is the essence of the house.

masculinity, patriarchal ideology and gender inequality institutionalize male domination and female subordination in Iraqi society. Khalifeh and Rababah (2022) revealed that proverbs and idioms about humans’ bodily parts could be classified into various types with respect to food, social relationships and marriage advice, friendships and strangers, a person’s characteristics, guidance, and contentment with life. Aragbuwa and Omotunde (2022) showed that women were portrayed metaphorically as a symbol of weaklings, evilness, whores, and procreants. The overall image of the analysed metaphors indicated that the women are mostly portrayed in “downward orientation” in the Yoruba. Besides, Migdadi et al. (2023) present a good classification of the analysed proverbs into those including body organs associated with eating, those referring to edible items and the eating process itself, and those encompassing tools used in eating.

The most prominent theme in literature is the connotative interpretation of animal-related expressions that describe the behavior of men and women (Al Jallad 2012; Al-Ghoweri et al. 2021; Al Salem et al. 2022; Hamdan et al. 2023). Al-Harabsheh (2020) revealed that animal names are used based on the addressees’ conduct, IQ, and personality. The animal names were chiefly employed as insults. Addressing people using animal names was regarded as a linguistic and cultural phenomenon. Kayed et al. (2023) found several similarities and differences between Arabic and English where these expressions mostly have negative connotations of ‘inferiority’ or ‘ingratitude’. Among the differences in the connotative meaning, a dog symbolizes ‘self-image destruction, laziness, cowardice, failure, and cleverness’ in Arabic only and ‘persistence’ and ‘misery’ in English proverbs.

Madani et al. (2023) revealed that both Algerian and Jordanian animal-related proverbs display various connotative meanings. Women in particular were preponderantly connected to derogatory connotations in both societies, namely foolishness, cunningness, powerlessness, inferiority, and deception. Though men enjoyed similar traits, women in Arab cultures were consistently portrayed as denigrated and subordinate. On the other hand, other traits were attributed to men such as authorization, power, and superiority over women. Animals-related positive characteristics (i.e. gazelles, peacocks, partridges, cats, and horses) were also employed to represent the beauty of women whereas others related to horses, camels, and lions were used to symbolize men’s strength, courage, and superiority.

Reviewing the related literature, it appears that gender-based analyses of proverbs have been conducted in numerous languages. However, very little research has focused on women’s representations in proverbs used in Arabic-speaking societies and none was conducted on it in the Jordanian Arabic-speaking community. Hence, this study attempts to fill this gap by investigating how Jordanians use folk proverbs to portray women.

Methods

This study adopts a qualitative approach. The folk proverbs were collected, analysed thematically in light of their contextual meanings into negative and positive themes and discussed based on BST and FCDA. Thirty-six naturally occurring proverbs on women were gathered in a log book, translated and then clarified. They were found the most frequently used folk proverbs among

Table 2 Proverbs representing women as the pillar of the house and family.

البيت بلا أم زي الجاكيت بلا كم	A home without a mother is like a jacket without a sleeve.
الأم تلم	The mother gathers.
اللى عنده أمه لا تهكل همه	The one who has his mother, do not worry about him.
المرأة باب البيت	A woman is the door of the house.

Jordanians. The reliability of the analysis of the proverbs was ensured by co-analysis of their content. Initially, the researchers independently classified the proverbs based on their content and then they discussed their analysis to establish consensus in their categorisation. The results demonstrated a significant similarity between their analyses, which was deemed appropriate and satisfactory.

Results

The analysis of the most frequently used proverbs among Jordanians has revealed that various attributions are attached to women in Jordanian folk proverbs. Women are presented both in negative and positive images, though the negative representation themes outweigh the positive representation themes among Jordanians in their daily life interactions. The results also show that these negative themes were used more by elderly people than by youth.

Positive representation themes

Symbol of kindness, devotion, motivation and help. The proverbs mentioned in Table 1 highlight the value and importance of daughters and women in the family. They indicate that giving birth to girls before boys makes mothers happy as they will not feel secluded and will have a hand to help them. Daughters are generally found good companions and friends to their mothers. Mothers usually love having daughters, and eagerly await them, as they will reduce the load of life on them. They have a feeling that they have support when they grow old and are looked after when they become weak. Every mother sees herself in her daughter; daughters are considered a miniature copy of their mother. From the point of view of many Jordanians, a girl is better than a boy because she is usually quiet, helps her mother with the housework, and takes care of her siblings and studies (Shorfat 2012).

The fourth proverb conveys the importance and value of a righteous and virtuous woman within the family and the household. In this title, “virtuous” refers to a person who possesses good qualities and noble ethics. It reflects the significance of the role a woman plays in positively shaping and creating an atmosphere of happiness and tranquility at home, where she is often the main source of love, care, and support for the family. The role and dedication of women in serving their families are considered essential foundations for stable family life and society as a whole.

The pillar of the house and family. The proverbs mentioned in Table 2 are common in Jordanian society, expressing the role of

women as the foundation and support of the family home, strengthening family bonds. These proverbs are often understood to mean that women are primarily responsible for managing the household and organizing its affairs, including cooking, cleaning, taking care of children, and tending to the needs of the family. This finding is in line with Shraim (2007) outcome that the portrait of a woman as a mother in the Jordanian folk proverb, in general, is the most honorable positive image due to its association with motherhood and household issues. The above Jordanian folk proverbs represent the mother's importance and role in caring for her children. These proverbs sanctify the image of motherhood.

A mother gathers her sons and daughters and does not separate them. She is considered a factor of stability for her children and the whole family. In the absence of the mother, the family loses support and care, scatters, disperses and its ability to lead a decent life is weakened. The mother gathers in the sense that the presence of the mother is what brings the brothers and sisters together and unites them under one roof. If the mother dies, the family unit dies with her, and they do not see each other except on special occasions. The above proverbs signify that women play a crucial role in making the home a comfortable and thriving place for the family. Typically, women are responsible for household chores and organizing family matters, such as cooking, cleaning, and daily care of family members. They are considered the pillar of family and domestic life. This concept was prevalent in traditional and conservative societies, where women were seen as confined to the home, and it was believed that their main duty was to serve the family. Such a notion could impose restrictions on women's freedom and hinder their personal and professional aspirations.

A representation of optimism. The proverbs illustrated in Table 3 indicate that the procreation of daughters is livelihood. It is a myth that is still circulating today in many forms as an almost certain fact that girls are a source of livelihood and blessing for their families as a kind of optimism. This viewpoint was supported by several sayings, including "بيت البنات بيت البركات" "The house of girls is the house of blessings", and "رزق البنات أكثر من رزق الصبيان" "The livelihood of girls is more than the livelihood of boys."

Table 3 Proverbs representing women as a symbol of optimism.

البنات رزقة وأبوهن مرزوق	The girls are livelihood, and their father is prosperous.
المرأة الطيبة مثل البستان الوردي	The good woman is like a rose garden.
أبو البنات مرزوق	The father of daughters will be fortunate
المرأة وردة بين الأشواك	A woman is like a rose among thorns.

The second proverb means that a woman with good manners and a kind heart brings happiness and beauty to the lives of others, just like a beautiful and blossoming garden. Women who possess qualities such as love, compassion, generosity, tenderness, and care for others are appreciated. The fourth proverb is used to describe the strength and resilience of women in facing challenges and difficulties in life. It means that a woman possesses an inner strength that enables her to endure hardships with the same determination and steadfastness that a rose maintains its beauty amidst thorns. In this proverb, the rose represents the beauty, delicacy, and softness of women, while the thorns symbolize the challenges and difficulties they encounter in life.

When these proverbs are used, they serve as a compliment to the exemplary woman who is considered a role model for noble morals, human feelings, strength and optimism. It encourages respect for the role of women and appreciation for their inner strength and capacity to adapt and overcome obstacles in life. Thus, it is essential to appreciate the role of virtuous women, treat them well, and recognize their positive contributions to daily life and society as a whole.

Negative representation themes

Feebleness and weakness. Table 4 demonstrates a set of proverbs that represent women as a symbol of feebleness and weakness. The first proverb is a negative popular saying spread in Eastern societies, including Jordanian society, meaning that the families' worries about their daughters are endless (Al-Shumar 2015). This proverb stems from several prevailing beliefs that when a girl is born, she brings grief to the whole family. There is a big concern about what will happen if she does not marry and how society will view her in this case. If the girl marries, the concern is whether her husband will be righteous or not. Another concern is if the wife does not have children.

Discrimination between boys and girls in the Jordanian culture has existed and been known for a long time. The Jordanian folk proverbs give the male a higher position than the female and consider the birth of a girl a source of concern while the birth of a boy is a source of pride. An indication that the female remains a concern on the shoulders of her parents and her family until the end of their lives. The reality confirms that the parent's concern about their daughters outweighs their concern for their sons; this is caused by the wrong beliefs of society and not by the girl's deficiency. Jordanian society is patriarchal and does not treat males and females equally in many matters. In most situations, a girl's missteps are unforgivable, while the same ones made by a boy do not affect his reputation as much as a girl's. In addition to that, the female's decision is not in her hands but is controlled by multiple habits, traditions, and mentalities. The stereotypes that shape attitudes towards women and men and their roles continue to impede girls' enjoyment of their full human rights and fundamental freedoms. That is why the Jordanian National Commission for Women was established to improve the women's

Table 4 Proverbs representing women as a symbol of feebleness and weakness.

هم البنات للممات	distress of the daughters exists till death.
أم البنت مسنودة بخيط وأم الولد مسنودة بحيط	The mother of the girl is supported by a thread, and the mother of the boy is supported by a wall.
اللي يتزوج مره زغيرة يحوز الخير والتدبيره	If you get married to a young woman, you will get good (often looked at the young woman as easy to obey and submit to the authority of the man, and she is an image of raw material that the man can shape as he wants, and therefore it is a source of good for him)
ظل رجّال ولا ظل حيط	The shadow of a man is much better than that of a wall
اللي مات جوزها يا عوزها	A widow is defeated and is in need
أجى للارملة جوز قالت أعور ما ينفع	A man proposed to a widow, she refused by saying he is one-eyed and useless. (As if she has to accept marrying any man as long as her husband died)

Table 5 Proverbs representing women as a symbol of immaturity and foolishness.

شور المرأة الصاب يجيب سبع مصائب اسمع للمرأة ولا تؤخذ برأيها شاوروهن وأخلفوا شوهرهن النسوان ناقصات عقل و دين المرأة بنصف عقل عقل المره عقل جاجه طويلة و هبيله	Women's advice, even if it is right, brings calamities. Listen to the woman, but do not take her opinion Consult them (the women) and violate their advice Women are deficient in reason and religion Woman is with half of a brain The women's brain is the same as a hen's brain Tall and stupid
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Table 6 Proverbs representing women as a symbol of disgrace.

يا بسترها يا بغيرها البت تجيب العار والعدو لباب الدار صوت حبة ولا صوت بنته عقربتين عالحيط ولا بنتين بالبيت المره خيرها لجوزها وشرها لاهلها	The woman, either in her decency (marriage) or in her grave The girl brings disgrace and the enemy to the door of the house The voice of a snake is better than the voice of a girl. Two scorpions on the wall is better than two girls in the house. (i.e., having a snake or scorpion in the house is better than having a girl out of pessimism) The good of a woman is for her husband, but the bad is for her parents
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status, maintain their gains and establish a societal culture and a national environment that support their role.

The second folk proverb reflects women's weak status, which reinforces society's view of girls as inferior. The word "thread" is used to indicate weakness since it is liable to break as soon as it is exposed to any force. While the "wall" is solid, it is difficult to collapse, which means that a woman who has a son or a husband will be protected. Based on the negative traditions prevalent in Jordanian society, the woman who gives birth to a son strengthens her position and makes her husband reckon with her and not leave her. The mother of girls is at risk of divorce because her husband may leave her or marry another woman¹ under the guise of wanting to have boys. Women in Jordan, like women throughout Arab society, prefer having male children to escape the social pressures and standards imposed by men's society on the one hand, and to have a social position supported by the birth of male children as a protection for women from society and the husband, and in many cases as an economic guarantee on the other.

Despite the tangible progress that Jordan has witnessed in terms of gender equality in recent times, there are still some people who discriminate between them and prefer a boy over a girl. If a woman gives birth to two or more daughters, her family, and her husband's family get angry and blame her. From their point of view, the son is the strong person who bears the name of his father, but many experiences and situations have proven that girls are sometimes stronger and better than boys. Unfortunately, this false belief destroyed many homes.

Immature and foolish. The proverbs presented in Table 5 are spoken by many Jordanians due to the prevailing habits in Jordanian society that underestimate the status of women and do not trust them. That is why they believe that their opinion and advice should not be taken into account, given that women lack wisdom, reason religion and sound opinion. As a result, the Jordanian man is keen not to say that his wife is the one who counsels him, which would cause his status to fall in front of his relatives and friends. Such a man is given the negative attributes of being a 'controlled man'. The meaning of these negative proverbs is reflected in some sayings frequently used among Jordanians "men's speech", "كلام رجال" which means that only men's talk is believed and trusted as opposed to women's, and "ما يجيبها الا رجالها" which signifies that only men can solve all problems and crises which is considered a preference for them over women who cannot do that.

The saying "ابن امه" is also used to represent women as a sign of weakness or cowardice as they can't take a decisive standpoint.

Even if they have a prominent standpoint, their standpoint will be ascribed to their brothers (أخت رجال, a sister of men) as a way of belittling and insulting women. These sayings attribute everything related to strength and gumption to men only. The proverbs consider that the man is solely responsible due to the incompetence of the woman, as he is the one with power. Even the likening of any act to the act of a woman in the sense of disdain or lack of importance is used permanently between men and women. For example, an unskilled driver is called a "woman driving," and inaccurate and unreliable words are called "women's talk."

Undoubtedly, the folk proverbs mentioned above are unfair to women. In many cases, if a man is afflicted with anxiety, he resorts - after God - to his mother, asking her for advice and supplication, or he may resort to his wife to convey his complaint to her, so she supports him and advises him to relieve his concern. The woman is the partner of the man, and she is the secret of his success and superiority. She is the wife, the mother, and the sister. However, women are human beings like men. Some of them have reason and discernment, and some have emotion and nervousness. Many things going on in the family, and the wife wants her husband to discuss these matters with her. She considers that it is her right to have a say in family affairs and that the husband does not decide anything unless they agree, especially on important matters.

Arab and Islamic history has proven that there were many prudent women whom men used to refer to in crucial decisions, take their advice, and act accordingly. How could men find it difficult to consult a woman, while the Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) took the advice of a woman on an issue that concerned Muslims, and even the prophet himself?

Disgrace. Table 6 mentions a set of proverbs that represent women as a symbol of disgrace. Most Jordanian families have always sought to marry off their daughters when they reach puberty because they believe the girl might be a source of shame. Marriage, according to their opinion, is the best way to protect her and preserve the reputation of her family, to the extent that they wish death for their daughter if she does not marry, lest she remains subject to shame and scandal. The full picture is clear in the last proverb which means that men are the rulers of women and protect them from falling into error, and in their absence, the women follow their whims without being deterred.

This phenomenon is not new in Arab history. During the pre-Islamic era, they used to bury their daughters alive in what is

Table 7 Proverbs representing women as a typical housewife and object of reproduction.

المره لو وصلت للمريخ اخرتها للطبخ
الشجرة اللى ما بتثمر حلال فطغها
المره بلا اولاد زي الخيمة بلا اوتاد

Even If a woman reaches Mars, her mission will eventually be to cook
The tree that does not bear fruit is lawful to cut down
A woman without children is like a tent without pegs

Table 8 Proverbs representing women as a source of cunning, deception, mistrust, and jealousy.

إن كيدهن عظيم
الرجال غابوا والنسوان سابوا
لا تأمن للمرأة اذا صلت ولا للشمس اذا ولت
الضرة مرة ولو كانت جرة

Women's cunning is immense
The men are absent, and the women became unrestrained
Do not trust women even if they pray and the sun if it disappears.
The fellow wife is unpleasant, even if it was a jar

known as “female infanticide,” for the fear of disgrace and desecration of the tribe’s honor. In case one of them wanted to keep his daughter alive, he would hide from the people to avoid humiliation and ridicule. When Islam came, female infanticide became prohibited, and whoever did it was punished until this custom ended (Awad 2010). On the other hand, the proverb ‘الرجل ما يعيبه غير جيبته’ “The man has no deficit, except his lack of money” is a biased statement for the man, showing that all the man’s faults can be overlooked, as long as he is financially capable.

Although a woman is affiliated with her husband in many respects, her family bears a great deal of responsibility if she falls by mistake. The Jordanian social rule is that: the good of a woman is for her husband and the worst for her parents. That is, as long as her reputation is good, then the benefit is for her husband, but if the woman falls into the abominable, then her parents bear the consequences of their daughter’s mistakes. This is explained by another folk proverb, “التاقه الجزا يطلها أهلها” (the scabbed she-camel is tarred by her owners). That is, just as a camel is treated with tar, parents are responsible for their daughters’ affairs (Al-Amad 2006). If a woman misbehaves and her husband finds that her behavior is abnormal, he may return her to her family. In this case, they are more entitled to hold her accountable for her actions, and thus her husband is freed from the consequences of her actions.

Typical housewife and object of reproduction. The proverbs in Table 7 represent the typical image and role of women in society. Such popular folk proverbs frustrate the determination of women and prevent them from playing a greater role in their outer society. It is customary for a woman, no matter how many academic degrees she obtains, her final place is at home, where her job is to prepare food and raise children. It is a call for women to be confined to the home for cooking and giving birth which in turn deprives them of their legitimate right to prove their identity in the field of work.

Jordanian society has defined the status of a woman who does not bear children, likening her to a tree that does not bear fruit. For example, the second folk proverb depicts the woman as a tree; if it is fruitless, then it is permissible to be cut down (i.e. divorce it). In other words, either a woman will give birth to many children, or she will be divorced, or her husband will marry a second woman. This is what makes many women give birth to a large number of children, which exposes them to great health risks. The above folk proverb reflects the oppression and backwardness of society, which imposes on women to give birth a lot and makes them not care about their health. Rather, the situation goes beyond the fact that people blame the woman for having only one son. “What is the use of a tree that bears no fruit except when it is cut down and thrown into the fire?”. It is like a reference to the barren woman and a call to her husband to leave her and marry another. The basic function

defined by society for women is childbearing and reproduction, and the woman is not considered the mistress of the house and is not psychologically stable until the baby comes, especially for the male. However, the woman’s status in the proverb is not for herself but for the child she gave birth to.

The woman in this proverb is also viewed from an angle that neglects her humanity. Unfortunately, women derive their value and stability from procreation. Therefore, the issue of childbearing remains a preoccupation that women seek, even if it is at the expense of their health and the living conditions of the home. The proverb conveys the human image of a woman who is late in giving birth to indicate the importance of the male. This proverb may be more reflective of reality given the society’s attitude towards the girl’s arrival. Women in a male-dominated society are considered a concern, and their presence is not welcome (Nashwan 2015: 45–46). There is also a widespread saying in Jordan that shows a woman’s permanent place is her home “البنيت بجياتها ثلاث طلعات: من بطن أمها لبيت أهلها، ومن بيت أهلها لبيت زوجها، (a girl has three outings in her life: from her mother’s womb to her family’s home, from her family’s home to her husband’s home, and from her husband’s home to the grave).

Source of Cunning, Deception, Mistrust, and Jealousy. Cunning is a kind of measure that includes causing harm to others by means of subterfuge. It may be for evil or good, but it is used more in negative contexts as embedded in proverbs mentioned in Table 8. The first proverb indicates a common belief in Jordanian society about the cunning of women by describing the cunning as an evil female phenomenon, and that it is often attached to women. In fairness, just as this trait is found in women, it is also implanted and rooted in some men. The presence of cunning and deception in both sexes is a reality that no one denies, especially if there is a lack of conscience, morals, weak religious scruples, and widespread mistrust among all. This applies to both men and women.

A woman’s jealousy of her co-wife is innate in her instinct, so she is not held accountable for it unless she transgresses (Shahin 2018). She falls because of jealousy of what God has forbidden her, such as falling into backbiting or gossip, or her jealousy leads her to request the divorce of her co-wife or plot against her. Jealousy is a change of heart, an outburst of anger; Because of the sense of sharing with others what is a person’s right, it is like a fire that is burning in the soul because others compete with a woman in something she loves, so jealousy makes a woman do what is not appropriate of words, and deeds.

Discussion

The findings of the analysis demonstrate that folk proverbs are an essential part of Jordanian culture and are represented through

language to convey and sustain certain ideologies and policies. In particular, they reveal that gender-based proverbs are old and deeply rooted in traditional and ancient customs in Jordan. Women appear to be portrayed both in negative and positive images, where the negative attributions outweigh the positive ones. They have been portrayed as a symbol of immaturity and foolishness, disgrace, a typical housewife, and a mere source of reproduction, cunning, deception, mistrust and jealousy. Few are the proverbs that elevate the status of women, and if they do, it is on the condition that they are mothers, sisters, and daughters providing help, compassion, and comfort to others. Some proverbs even carry racism, bullying, and standards enshrined as facts, thus wronging the coming generations.

Despite all the Jordanian proverbs that curse having daughters and wives and consider them a source of affliction, pessimism, scandal, and foolishness, some proverbs depict them as a symbol of love, affection, and support. The analysed proverbs limit them to their stereotypical role as a housewife, whose mission is to cook, give birth, and take care of her husband and children only, and ridicule them when they try to transcend this role as one worthy of being consulted, for example. The role of the mother gains great respect and value in the life of the Jordanian family. Daughters, sisters, and mothers are the ones who protect others with compassion and tenderness. The woman is the pillar and foundation of the home; she has high abilities in raising, teaching, caring for, and feeding her children, besides reinforcing family values and traditions. These proverbs have both pejorative and complimentary connotations about women, though the former is found to outweigh the latter. Thus, this finding lends support to researchers' (Kochman-Haladyj 2020; Al-Azzawi and Salih 2021; Ghafoori and Elyas 2022; Madani et al. 2023) finding that women are undervalued and underestimated in proverbs and only restricted to certain roles of caring for others in society. It is in line with Wolfrang's (1993, p. 66) claim that "Almost every proverb that touches on women contains a severe negation of the value of women in society". According to Darwish (2015), extreme confusion is caused by cultures that both sanctify women and praise their value and are sometimes harsh on them, as in the folk view of having a daughter that fluctuates between optimism, apprehension, and cruelty.

The analysis discloses the sociocultural values and traditions of Jordanian society. Traditions, values, and norms prevalent in the Jordanian community are significant factors that contribute to belittling women and restricting their activities. Both negative and positive images represent something that is deeply rooted in people's minds, which is that women are found for the sake of others' comfort and not for proving themselves as normal human beings who are entitled to enjoy their rights without distinction of sex or other statuses. Women were previously portrayed in the Jordanian media as backward and uneducated individuals who enjoyed dullness and stupidity while being powerless, obedient, and subordinate to their husbands (Al-Amad 2006). The Jordanian folk proverbs appear to be the most prominent forms of documentation of all cultural aspects of the language in question, among which is the most important aspect of gender inequality. The stereotypical depiction of women as typical housewives submissive to men and valued for their affection, domestic roles, and ability to bear sons and grow the family. This finding could be justified by the fact that Jordan may still be based in certain contexts on a gendered-biased culture. The derogatory depiction of women reinforces their subordinate status to men, who are in positions of authority and power. This finding supports other researchers' (Al-Zubaidi 2019; Durpui 2019; Kochman-Haladyj 2020) findings that show how proverbs are a reflection of gender-biased ideology.

The proverbs are old sayings that have been transmitted through the ages. However, through the process of collecting the data, the researchers noticed that these proverbs were used more by the elderly compared to their younger counterparts. The frequency of usage indicates their significance and impact on people's daily lives. The difference in the frequency of usage of proverbs between the youth and the elderly reveals the interchangeable impact of proverbs on society and vice versa. The creation and usage of proverbs may be a reformulation of society's standpoint toward gender and the consolidation of the established power structures. The impact of such proverbs on people's mindset is evident nowadays in women's smashed women's self-image, destroyed beliefs, and behaviors that are all directed to others' sake and benefit while at the same time forgetting themselves. Wolfrang (1993) argued that these folk proverbs "brainwash" people through false generalizations and stereotypical conceptions, which in turn results in changes in people's viewpoints and conceptions about specific issues. Such ideologies exert an influence on the community through perpetuating power and dominance-based relationships, as claimed by Fairclough (2003).

However, it is important to note that though these proverbs are old and rooted in traditional and ancient customs, they may not necessarily reflect the reality in modern societies. Despite the strict conservatism of Jordanian society, no one can deny the gradual change that is in reality happening nowadays. In contemporary times, it is emphasized that every individual within the family has a unique and significant role in creating a loving and sustainable home environment. This finding is evident in the variation of the frequencies of usage which could indicate that societies have evolved and awareness of women's rights has somehow increased. The negative presentation of women has gradually diminished in the current community, especially among the youth. A more diverse and comprehensive role for women has emerged, allowing them to participate in various fields outside the home, such as work, education, politics, and social engagement. Nowadays, many people consider that women have equal rights and opportunities as men in society. They believe that women should have the freedom to choose their roles in life, whether within or outside the family. As societies evolve and social roles change, women have taken on more diverse and inclusive roles in modern communities. They have been provided with opportunities to work, access education, and participate in various aspects of civic and economic life. This means that the changes in women's lives and their involvement in work and holding leadership positions should inevitably be reflected in the language lexicon and usage.

Regarding the source of these proverbs, it is not necessary that the men have formulated these proverbs considering a masculine nature. This could be ascribed to our society which is in general a patriarchal society. Even women themselves may formulate proverbs praising and glorifying men despite their belonging to a different sex. These women anchor the culture of their oppression themselves in society. They are an example of this patriarchal society, which is reflected in different forms among which is the folk proverb "The shadow of a man is much better than that of a wall," and "The man in the house is mercy if he were a coal (of a dark skin)." However, it's worth noting that despite the importance of this essential role, perceptions of women's roles have changed throughout history. Women now play more diverse and comprehensive roles in modern societies, including participation in the workforce and contributions to various scientific, cultural, and social fields. Therefore, women should be regarded as individuals with multiple talents and capabilities who actively contribute to the development and progress of societies, both within and outside the home, rather than limiting their potential by confining them to specific roles.

The findings disclose the fact that these beliefs still exist in Jordanian culture, but the extent to which they are practiced varies across members of the society. This means that such beliefs can not be generalized to all of them. Nowadays, and with the advancement of civilization and thought, the concept or idea of preference for boys over girls has changed in Jordanian society. Where the girls have become in the eyes of the parents much better than the boys. In the past, they had a limited role in helping their mother at home until they grew up and got married. Today, many girls are involved in the field of work and shoulder the responsibility of the home, parents, and brothers. Reality proves that females are more affectionate than boys for their entire family, as the boy grows up, gets married, and settles in his home, while the righteous daughter takes care of her parents, even if she gets married, she does not cut off from them and continues to honor her parents, unlike some sons (Awad 2010).

The prevailing stereotypes in Jordanian society have made women live in a state of psychological stress, anxiety, stress, depression, and a pessimistic view of the future. According to Athamneh (2020), getting rid of this culture is not easy. This requires great effort, synchronized with continuous education, and sound and balanced awareness. Obiedat (2019, P.1) argues that "Although we have reached the time of the third millennium and the stage of intellectual and technological maturity, many still do not do justice to women, and we need to change the mentality of many people and our societal culture towards social justice to make women equal to their male brothers".

This necessitates serious work to change the societal view ingrained in the minds of individuals, which attain negative attributes to women. People should be made aware that a girl is a human being just like a boy. We must also educate her humanity in a way that does not burden her spirit or make her feel like she is a person accused of her actions. Education is usually centered on the basis that the girl is (a disgrace) and that she is the person who is feared by the male, and we must put her in a closed box that the man has the key to. At a time when shame is considered an individual matter in Islam when a girl practices shame, she alone bears the consequences of that, not all of her family. It is no secret that the path toward the advancement of women's position in Jordan is not smooth, as obstacles stand between them and achieving their dreams. Although women were able to obtain academic degrees, prove their worth in positions of leadership and political representation, and break successfully into professions that were restricted to men for long periods, popular proverbs are still a cultural heritage that entrenches violence against women and diminishes their role in society.

The study contributes to knowledge by examining folk proverbs as a good way to understand the beliefs and gender-related power differential prevalent in Jordanian society. It emphasizes that upholding such gender-based norms is a sign of patriarchal ideologies that boost men's supremacy and women's subjugation. Such findings are of great significance as they make people question such gender-based underlying expectations. They would raise people's awareness of such biased generalizations against women in proverbs, and hence help in producing a generation mindful of the significance of advocating equity in society. The concept of preserving and protecting women should not be associated with men, rather it should be related mainly to rehabilitating and training them to make their own decisions, giving them opportunities in life to learn, and enhancing their self-confidence so they can lead their lives and that their opinion is fully considered for in her home and society. This is the greatest protection and immunity for women not her association with a man who can leave her at any time.

Based on the analysis, the results implied that societies that have asymmetrically constructed linguistic resources are systematically utilized to perpetuate gender differences; hegemonic

masculinity and submissive femininity. The researchers call for the need to pay attention to the linguistic content that people use in daily communication, especially on social media; they need to be selective in the phrases used. We recommend that such women-based derogatory proverbs not be used in communication. These legacies must remain in the archives of history as old papers, or be subjected to a real screening commensurate with the advancement of women's status in society and the imposition of themselves in the labor market and life in general. In other words, the position of women could be clearly defined through linguistically encapsulating pro-women social beliefs and values in a way that is against man-made ideologies and policies.

Conclusion

The study uncovered gender hierarchical differences in women's stereotypical representations in the target proverbs. It also highlighted that the prevalent negative connotations of women outweigh the positive ones. Women are mainly associated with motherhood and the assigned ordinary tasks include organizing and planning daily household affairs, caring for children, and managing household resources. They are preponderantly depicted negatively in the majority of the selected proverbs as a symbol of feebleness and weakness, immaturity and foolishness, disgrace, a typical housewife, an object of reproduction, and a source of cunning, deception, mistrust and jealousy.

The researcher(s) recommend that Jordanian authorities establish a comprehensive plan for correcting the wrong stereotypical vision of women through a strict review of laws and regulations to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women. Media should play an active role in reviving and broadcasting popular proverbs that present a good image of women and strengthen their essential role in society. New school curricula and educational materials need to be developed to teach children how to respect and appreciate women and their experiences. Educating people about the role of proverbs in socialization is also required.

Concerning foreign and second language learners of Arabic learners, it is undeniable that studying folk proverbs serves as a fruitful resource for learning the art of allegory in the target language. It shows how people's experiences and thoughts are summarized and illustrated in a short form. Thus, this study provides a valuable example for training learners to analyze language critically to achieve better mastery of this topic. It also expands their knowledge of the slang language, Jordanian vocabulary, society and culture in a way that may develop learners' critical thinking skills. The mastery of these skills enhances learners' linguistic intuition and enables them to use language as a means of communication and the development of their critical mindset and discerning personality.

This study is limited to elucidating the ideological representations of women in Jordanian folk proverbs from the perspective of cultural semiotics. Thus, this study has laid the ground for further comparative research studies on both genders as depicted in Jordanian proverbs. It opens other avenues for researchers interested in proverbs and any similar or related topics. It is also recommended that more studies be conducted to analyze other main themes explicit and implicit stated in proverbs. Studying the portrayal of both genders across cultures would be a promising future research topic.

Data availability

All data analysed in this study are included in this article.

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Note

1 According to Islam, a man may have up to four legal wives at the same time but he has to treat them all equally. If a man fears that he will not be able to meet this condition, he is not allowed more than one wife.

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Author contributions

The authors contributed equally to this work.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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