



Contents lists available at SEI

Psychology Research

journal homepage: www.seiofbluemountain.com



Critical Analysis of ‘Nature-Women’ Metaphor From Ecofeminism

Xiuxue GAO*

Foreign Languages School of Qingdao Agricultural University, Qingdao 266109, P.R.China

KEYWORDS

Ecofeminism,
Metaphor,
Language system

ABSTRACT

Critical analysis of language system from ecofeminism provides a new approach to cognitive nature of language. Ecofeminism claims that both woman and nature belong to the otherness in the patriarchal society, and they are in symbolic relation and thus forms the metaphorical thinking of ‘nature-woman’. The metaphorical thinking of ‘nature-woman’ is the source of discrimination to sex and nature, which is shown in language from two aspects: feminization of nature and naturalization of women. In order to establish the ecological relation between human and nature, we should firstly change cultural and social views and secondly establish an ecological language system.

© ST. PLUM-BLOSSOM PRESS PTY LTD

1 Introduction

There are two schools about the motivation of language in linguistics. One holds that language is arbitrary and there is no logical relation between form and meaning. The other holds that language is iconic and there is an iconic relation between form and meaning. More and more researchers agree with iconicity of language because language is the sign created by human beings and there must be the rational factors of human beings. Motivation is the nature of language signs. Cognitive linguistics points out that language is not the objective reflection of the facts but the result of categorization and language reflects cognition of human beings. Mental experientialism and metaphorical thinking are important philosophical principles of cognitive linguistics. Experientialism of the mind emphasizes the function of body in the cognitive process and holds that the formation of category, concept, conference, and mind is based on experience of the body. Metaphorical thinking is that people make use of metaphor to think and metaphor is based on experience of the body and is the product of the body, experience, brain and the mind^[1]. Cognition of language must show anthropocentrism and language humanism, reflect the understanding of human beings to nature and society and reflect the relationship between human beings and nature, human being and society, and human beings and human beings.

Taking the stand of view against anthropocentrism, ecofeminism analyzes the relationship between women and nature from a unique perspective of feminism and female gender, which provides a new approach for the cognitive nature of language. Ecofeminism theories are mainly used in literature criticism and the article tries to probe into the relationship among nature, women and language from ecofeminism and carries out critical analysis about language system.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: gxxholly@163.com

2 Overview of Ecofeminism

Ecofeminism is a new thought school in the West which combines ecology and feminism together. French feminist Françoise Eaubonne first put forward the term of ecofeminism in 1974 and this marks the beginning of theoretical study of ecofeminism in the West. In the 1990s, ecofeminism flourished.

Ecofeminism focuses on the relationship between women and nature and holds that there is a close relationship between women and nature. Some ecofeminists hold that women are close to nature from biology because women have the same function with nature. Both of them can create and foster life. Some feminists hold that why women are closer to nature because in the patriarchal society, women and nature suffer men's oppression and domination and both of them are in the belittled position. And some ecofeminists hold that the statement that women are closer to nature than men strengthens duality. According to duality, human beings are superior to nature and women are inferior to men, which show a domination relation. It is reasonable for men to oppress and dominate women. Men are in the superior and dominating position whereas women and nature are in the inferior and obedient position. In a word, ecofeminism is against anthropocentrism and androcentrism, and holds that androcentric, analytic and mechanistic viewpoint makes men control and oppress nature and women. Ecofeminism binds liberation of women and liberation of nature together and connects nature discrimination and gender discrimination together. Ecofeminism holds that human, other species and earth are equal and they form an inseparable organic whole. The goal of ecofeminism is to establish a Utopia which follows ecologism and feminism.

3 'Nature-Women' Metaphor From the Perspective of Ecofeminism

Language is the important carrier of thought and culture. In the men-dominated society, the image of culture is produced mainly by the men, therefore men generalize their life experience. Women are in the inferior position as language users and they have to let men wrongly describe women's experience and sense. Feminists claim that our language is men-centered, and language not only filters and names the reality, but also twists the reality, and thus establishes a one-dimensional reality.

Roach points out that when women are regarded nearer to nature than men, women are regarded inevitably imperfect persons, therefore there produced the concept 'otherness'. Otherness is the object which benefits men subjects in the patriarchal society^[2]. In the patriarchal society, men take women and nature as otherness, both of which are used by men. There is a symbolic relation between women and nature. According to cognitive linguistics, our thinking is metaphorical and language is metaphorical accordingly. It is inevitable to form 'nature-women' metaphor in the patriarchal society. This metaphor is not based on nature quality and female physiology, but based on the belief deeply rooted on traditional culture.

3.1 Feminization of nature

A lot of idioms in languages reflect feminization of nature. The most prominent is 'nature-women' metaphor, such as Mother River, mother land, and mother earth. The metaphorical relation between nature and women can be traced back to the ancient times when people compared the primitive nature to the mother of human beings because the earth bred all things as mother bred life of human beings. The image of mother in the ancient times was lofty and human beings adored mother. There appeared a lot of creation goddesses in the ancient myths, such as Chinese ancestor, the goddess Nuwa, the earth-goddess in Greek myth, Gaia. Nuwa and Gaia have the similar status in the East and the West. The difference is that Nuwa created human beings whereas Gaia created gods and goddesses.

With the entrance into the patriarchal society, the status of women began to fall and became the otherness gradually. 'Women-nature' metaphor became the symbolic link between nature discrimination and women discrimination when the West culture was in a certain period. In the patriarchal society women were still regarded as mother, but the good image of holiness and loftiness became fuzzy and the mother image represents nurture, care and offer.

In the beginning of the 16th century, organicism held that nature was the mother to feed life, and mother and nature were kind and committed. With the fast development of industrialization, mechanism took the place of organicism and the idea of nature as the conquered object became prominent. In the 17th century, the science revolution rising in European continent produced a new insight towards the world. The dualistic view took self as the observing subject and outside world as the observed object. Nature and human beings were separated and nature became a passive, static, controllable and observed object. Nature descended into a subordinate and passive image^[3]. Earth and women had similar status, function and nature in the patriarchal society. To compare the earth to mother conveys a concept: human beings can ask from the earth without payback to it and the resources in the earth are limitless. The wildness and disorder of nature in the disasters are similar with self-willingness and lustfulness of women. There appeared 'nature-witch' metaphor. People called natural phenomena such as flood, storm, volcano, etc. as the abuse of power.

The reality that nature and women are conquered and occupied by men is shown in the 'raping' metaphor. Plundering nature is like raping women. It has been a metaphor for all kinds of raping to the earth, just like raping women with various kinds of excuses^[4]. The raping concept implies the lure of women to men. The women themselves, such as being exposed with little clothing, cause the uncontrollable behaviors of men. Therefore, the raping is illegal but forgivable. Women are eager for being raped subconsciously and this eagerness maps to nature. The metaphor of 'raping earth' represents the acceptance to violence and domination and reflects inherence of human beings to abuse nature and the role of men. The raping metaphor supposes that nature is willing to cooperate

with men like women: lions and tigers are willing to be killed; sky and sea are willing to be polluted. Spender points out that the word raping does not reflect experience of women, but silence of women and understanding and naming to it of men^[5]. The raping metaphor strengthens legality of this word and behavior and intensifies the view that nature and women can be used by men. The raping metaphor is shown in many other idioms, especially occupation of land and violation of women's body, such as the raping of the land, virgin forest, and virgin land, penetrating the wilderness, and penetrating Mother Earth.

3.2 Naturalization of women

Naturalization of women refers to comparing women to nature, especially to animals, plants, and food in the nature, which reflects the discrimination of men to women, i.e. sexism in language. Men take nature and women as objects for use, so that the description and judgment to women are made according to their tastes. On the one hand, men look down upon women, and on the other hand, they wish women to be sexy, beautiful, dependent on them and pleasing to them. Women are possessions and conquered objects and they exist for the existence of men.

Women are animals. The metaphor of naturalization of women in English is linking women and animals together. Women are often compared to pigs, dogs, bitches, beavers, rabbits, old bats, and so on. These metaphors are often derogatory, and they belittle and vilify women by highlighting cowardice, timidity, wordiness, weakness and sometimes sexiness. The docile animals, such as lambs, chickens, pigeons, and bunnies, show women's weakness and gentleness or innocence. We have the idioms 'as coward as chicken', 'be as mild as a lamb' to describe women. The animals such as cats, hens, bitches, vixens, and cows show ugliness of women. For example, the cat is gossip women, the bitch is dissolute women, and the cow is fat and dirty women. In Chinese, we refer women to tigers, foxes, and snakes, etc.

Women are flowers. There are a lot of metaphors of 'women-flower'. Women are like flowers, beautiful, fragrant, and pleasing to eyes. Different to 'women-animal' metaphor, flower metaphors are almost considered commendatory to highlight the beauty of women. In the literature of both the west and the east, writers always compare the beautiful women to flowers, such as rose, lily, jasmine, and violet. We use 'as fair as a lily/rose' to describe the extreme beauty of women, 'roses in her cheeks' to describe cheeks in pink-and-white complexion, and 'shrinking violet' to refer shy girls.

Flowers are regarded as the best symbol for women. On one hand, women are like flowers, bright-colored and beautiful, and on the other hand, women are like flowers, fragile and transient. 'Women-flower' metaphor reflects the attention of the whole society to the outside beauty of women. Men wish women to please them like flowers and they impose this idea on women. 'Women-flower' metaphor also reflects superior status of men. Men think that women are delicate like flowers, they need protection and they are easy to be destroyed.

Women are food. To compare women to food is also a common metaphor. People in the West prefer biscuit-like food to refer to women and call their lovers, spouses and partners honey and sweetheart. Cookie refers to beautiful girls or sweet girls, cheese-cake refers to sexy and naked women and tart refers to dissolute women. Women are often compared to fruits, for example, peaches and tomatoes refer to beautiful girls. In Chinese, we have the saying that the girl is so beautiful that she can be feasted on. The beautiful girls are often described as: they have apricot eyes, a cherry mouth, an oval face, a tender lotus root neck, and green onion root fingers.

The food metaphor often implies sex or sex-related things more or less, so that such a special metaphor is called sex suggestive metaphor. The reason why food and sex are linked together because they belong to the lowest level of Maslow's hierarchy of needs—physiological need. The food metaphor mainly takes women as target, which means discrimination and possession. What kind of food women are is determined by men, specifically by their senses, such as vision, taste, and smell.

4 Conclusions: An Ecological Language System

The naming of a social phenomenon reflects the understanding manner of the society to this phenomenon and their interaction with each other. The naming is not what this phenomenon is but the understanding to this phenomenon. Our experience to nature is based on society and culture construction, and language plays a very important role in the construction. Spender points out that the male culture domination and patriarchal prejudice have been internalized in language^[5].

Language reflects culture and society and at the same time culture and society are constrained by language. According to Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, language form determines the viewpoint of language users to the world. The way of language description about the world determines the way we perceive the world. That is, our behaviors are controlled by language which has been the instrument of social communication^[6]. Feminists agree with determinism of Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, and they hold that language determines our thought, view and reality. Just as men control resources, men control language and determine definition and application ways of language. Language solidifies men's holiness and authority.

Therefore, in order to establish an ecological relation between nature and human beings, on one hand, we should change our culture and social ideas, and on the other hand, we should establish an ecological language system. Some people put forward that we should adopt scientific language to take place of metaphorical language and they think that metaphorical language misleads us in understanding the nature of objects. But metaphor is the basic way to perceive this world and metaphor makes our language colorful. Metaphor is an indispensable part of language and metaphor is the way we live by^[7]. We should try to establish the scientific and ecological metaphor. James Lovelock proposes Gaia hypothesis. The kernel idea is that the earth is a living organ which has the

ability to adjust itself. If there are some harmful factors in it, Gaia has the function to feed back and can clear the harmful factors^[8]. ‘Earth-Gaia’ metaphor gives us an impression that earth is extremely powerful, and earth is more like a fierce girl than a kind mother^[9]. The metaphor intrigues our awe to nature, and therefore restrains us from destroying nature. In the similar way, we can establish ‘nature-companion’ metaphor, and adopt homeland in stead of motherland. Homeland needs us to build together and love together whereas motherland means blind dedication of mother. We also should establish language for equality between men and women and try to avoid sexism, for example, ‘women-half of sky’ metaphor.

References

- [1]. Lakoff, G. & M. Johnson. *Philosophy in the Flesh—The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought* [M]. New York: Basic Books, 1999
- [2]. Roach, Catherine. *Loving Your Mother: on the Mother-Nature Relation* [J]. *Hypatia*, 1991 (1): 46-58
- [3]. Merchant, Carolyn. *The Death of Nature—Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* [M]. Translated by WU Guoxiang, et al. Changchun: Jilin People’s Publishing House, 1999 (in Chinese)
- [4]. Plant, Judith. *Healing the Wounds: The Promise of Ecofeminism* [C]. Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1989
- [5]. Spender, Dale. *Man Made Language* [M]. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980
- [6]. HU Zhuanglin, et al.. *A Course: Linguistics* [C]. Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2006
- [7]. Lakoff, George & Mark Johnson. *Metaphors We Live By* [M]. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980
- [8]. Lovelock, James. *Gaia: A New Look on Life on Earth* [M]. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979
- [9]. Lovelock, James. *The Earth is Not Fragile* [A]. In B. Cartledge (Ed.). *Monitoring the Environment* [C]. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992