Stereotypes: Unquestioned Metaphors

by

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The woman's eyes are heavy with green eye shadow, the pupils brown; her hair is long and dark. The sultry seductress extends her snakeskin clothed arm to show a snake's head formed by the elongated meeting of her thumb and forefinger. As well as giving the impression of a snake's head, her hand holds a black bottle of perfume named, Poison. This ad is powerful and continues the stereotype of women as temptresses, a metaphor which began with Eve and the apple. Ads for the perfume, Obsession, for Calvin Klein jeans, for many brands of make-up, and a long list of products rely on this image of WOMAN AS TEMPTRESS

Metaphors such as this have the power to shape and reflect values and attitudes, which in turn can influence how we think and act. This metaphor, WOMAN AS TEMPTRESS, makes us concentrate on that narrow meaning to the exclusion of other qualities of women. We never see WOMAN AS TEMPTRESS printed in large letters in an ad. There is no need for that because all the visual clues are there through color, facial expression, and the one word Poison, or in other ads: a seductive pose, an exposed body.

In his books, *More Than Cool Reason* and *Metaphors We Live By*, with Mark Turner and Mark Johnson, George Lakoff writes of the power of conceptual metaphors. Because conceptual metaphors influence our thinking and underlie the verbal and nonverbal language we use, they are much more powerful than our spoken or written words. Lakoff and Johnson in *Metaphors We Live By* call our attention to two other conceptual metaphors that influence attitudes toward women: RATIONAL IS UP AND EMOTION IS DOWN. A brief list of some expressions in our culture proves the existence of those two conceptual metaphors:

–The discussion fell to the emotional level, but he raised it to the rational level.
–She couldn't rise above her emotions.
–He stood there like a man and didn't break into tears.
–We put our feelings aside and had a rational discussion of the issue.

We have a habit of stereotyping women as emotional and men as rational without questioning that stereotype and without questioning the value of the rational over the emotional.

Constantly we are aware of problems for women caused by our culture's valuing the rational over the emotional. How often have women been kept out of important positions in the business world, in education, in politics, etc., because they might be too emotional to deal with important problems, which supposedly can be dealt with best on the rational level? Because we have been attuned through cultural tradition and through our own patterns of behavior to think of cool logic, divorced from any relational or emotional dimensions as the ultimate level of human abilities, we have learned to undervalue the relational and emotional.

The examples I've just given are conceptual metaphors. We don't often reflect upon these conceptual metaphors but accept them as perfectly valid ways of looking at the world and our personal reality. It is because they are so conventional and automatic that they are powerful.

It becomes clear that stereotypes develop from unquestioned metaphors, like those previously mentioned; and, although they refer to metaphors stereotyping women, we could do a similar analysis of underlying metaphors stereotyping men. Metaphors other than WOMAN IS TEMPTRESS that affect women directly and still persist despite years of refutation through the women's movement are such stereotypes as: WOMAN IS SEXUAL OBJECT. WOMAN IS HER BODY. WOMAN IS A VICTIM. Pornography and much of advertising promote these metaphors. Often the metaphors are subtle, even subliminal, more subtle in mainstream magazines, TV shows, and movies and more blatant in specialized forms of media.

A study showing the prevalence of language supporting the above metaphors appears in the book, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things*, in which George Lakoff reports a study of metaphors for anger done by him and Zoltan Kovecses, a researcher from Czechoslovakia. Their study shows the similarity of expressions and metaphors describing both lust and anger. The uses of language they record voice underlying attitudes and values that substantiate the existence of the conceptual metaphors WOMAN IS SEXUAL OBJECT. WOMAN IS HER BODY. WOMAN IS VICTIM. WOMAN IS TEMPTRESS.

Their research shows that anger and lust are clearly emotions for which our culture generates abundant language. The central and most generally accepted metaphor for our understanding of anger is ANGER S HEAT, and many expressions describing lust echo that conceptual metaphor.

n this metaphor the human body is compared to something like a pressure cooker, which will explode or the lid will blow off if the heat

increases too much thus building up more pressure than the pot can hold. The heat scale in the pressure cooker is mapped onto the anger scale within a person. Explosion is the loss of control. If a person gets angry beyond a certain point, she loses control. When too much anger builds up, he explodes.

The following examples illustrate Lakoff's theory that linguistic expressions illustrate the power of underlying conceptual metaphors. The linguistic expressions arise out of the attitudes and thoughts already present in the conceptual metaphors (capital letters).

Don't get hot under the collar. They were having a heated argument. You make my blood boil. He blew a gasket. ANGER IS HEAT.

She went into an insane rage. You're driving me nuts. He got so angry, he went out of his mind. She'll have a fit. ANGER IS INSANITY.

You need to subdue your anger. He lost control over his anger. She fought back her anger. ANGER IS AN OPPONENT.

He has a monstrous temper. She unleashed her anger. He has a fierce temper. ANGER IS A DANGEROUS ANIMAL (385-405).

Lakoff sees a connection between the language related to the emotion of anger and the high incidence of rape in our country. In some cultures, rape is virtually unknown, and he suggests that the way we conceptualize both lust and anger, together with our various folk theories of sexuality, may be a contributing factor to many instances of violence against women (409).

Lakoff reminds us that anger in America is understood in terms of heat, fire, wild animals, and insanity as well as a reaction to an external force. Just as one can have smoldering sexuality, one can have smoldering anger. One can be consumed with lust and consumed with anger. One can be insane with lust and insane with anger. Desire as well as anger can get out of control. Lakoff believes that the connection between our conception of lust and our conception of anger is by no means accidental, and that this connection has important social consequences (412). Note that many of the following metaphors and expressions are used by both men and women. First I will give common expressions and then list the conceptual metaphors that those expressions generate:

She's an old flame. She's burning with desire. He was consumed by desire. He's still carrying a torch for her. LUST IS HEAT. (ANGER IS HEAT.)

I'm crazy about her. I'm madly in love with him. You're driving me insane. I'm wild over her. LUST IS INSANITY. (ANGER IS INSANITY.)

He's known for his conquests. Better put on my war paint. He fled from her advances. She surrendered to him. LUST IS WAR. (ANGER IS AN OPPONENT.) He's a wolf. He looks as if he's ready to pounce. He preys upon unsuspecting women. You bring out the beast in me. LUST OUT OF CONTROL IS AN ANIMAL. (ANGER IS A DANGEROUS ANIMAL.) (Lakoff, 1987, (409-411).

The previous expressions and the metaphorical concepts underlying them show the connections in our culture between lust and physical force, even war. Because of the great similarity in the language, it's easy to conclude that there must be links in our thinking between anger and lust.

Women's groups fighting pornography and exploitive language against women also see these connections. There are many examples in the language of advertising both verbal and nonverbal that show anger and violence toward women. Often it is subtle, but the messages are there, messages of women being passive, often passive victims to be preyed upon, of being sex objects, or being temptresses and thus deserving of punishment. We often don't take time to analyze ads that illustrate anger and violence against women, but when we are attuned to that kind of exploitive language, we don't have to look far to find them.

More and more women writers in their poetry, novels, research writing, and essays use their gifts with language to instill respect for the power and beauty of the female body and thus counteract the effects of exploitive language.

One such writer is Suzanne Kobasa, who in her doctoral research at the University of Chicago called us to reflect on a strong metaphor for today's woman: WOMAN IS HARDY. In her dissertation Kobasa describes differences between the person who sees herself as a victim and the person who possesses the characteristics of hardiness. The victim views herself as having no choices after a traumatic experience, sees herself as not mattering, and sees no sense in being creative while assuming a victim identity. On the other hand, the person who possesses hardiness has developed the following characteristics: she has a sense that she's in control of her life; changes in her life are seen as challenges and not threats; and she has a sense of commitment to herself. She believes she's worthwhile and can commit herself to actions that are valuable. The use of the word, "hardy," is interesting. It has the connotation of strength, good health, and ability to cope, but it never connotes the kind of strength that dominates another.

Karen Hilgers, CSJ, in her doctoral study on PSYCHOLOGICAL HARDINESS AND THE RAPE VICTIM, shows - not surprisingly - that the victim of rape who possessed hardiness was much better able to cope with that psychological trauma.

Literature, too, often gives us a picture of characters triumphing over seemingly impossible odds. Much literature written by women of color, women who have been subjected throughout the history of our country to terrible violence and dehumanization, is permeated with a sense of triumph over adversity. One such example is Zora Neale Hurston's character, Janie, in *Their Eyes Were Watching God.* Despite relationships with two men who try to rob her of all sense of self, she triumphs and becomes a strong woman. It's not a book about the terrible things that men do to women - although that's present - but about stereotypes and how people live out those stereotypes. In Janie's third subsequent relationship, Hurston writes beautifully about the experience of mutual respectful love between a man and woman. In many ways Janie was a victim, but she clearly possessed that characteristic of hardiness - calling to the fore her own inner reserves despite the dehumanizing experiences to which she was submitted.

WOMAN IS A BUILDER OF NETWORKS is a metaphor underlying many of the endeavors engaging women's time and attention: creation of the aids quilt, Judy Chicago's art and her collaborators in THE BIRTH PROJECT, Women Against Military Madness, Mothers Against Drunk Driving, and the many peace organizations in which women are a driving force.

Picturing a woman as a network builder is a better reflection of today's reality than images of women in advertising portraying her as unable to relate to others. Think of the shampoo ads in which a woman is saying, "Don't hate me because I'm beautiful." Of course, the implication is that women hate other women who are more attractive to men than they are. We also have the ads in which a particular cleaning product is a woman's best friend. Those types of ads discount one of a woman's greatest strengths, relational skills.

Janice Raymond in her book, *A Passion for Friends*, gives many examples to support the metaphor: WOMAN IS THOUGHTFULNESS. To think of a woman as embodying thoughtfulness certainly is nothing new. We expect women to be thoughtful; that's one of the roles they play. Raymond suggests there are two ways to explain that word: the ability to reason and the ability to be considerate and caring. She contends that this thoughtfulness should not be a compulsion or an indiscriminate giving to others that knows no limits. Women have been socialized to

react almost instinctively to the needs of others and not from self-directed thinking. This kind of thoughtfulness is actually the opposite of being full of thought (220).

According to Raymond, thoughtfulness informed by thinking is necessary to the sustaining of friendship. Thinking is essential for persons to know and to dialogue with themselves; and without that personal dialogue, they cannot communicate with others (218). The metaphor, WOMAN IS THOUGHTFULNESS, at its best brings together the two meanings of thoughtfulness described by Raymond and joins actions with thought.

It is possible for language-sensitive people to influence, through their writing, speaking, and visual arts metaphors that present positive images of women, such as: WOMAN IS CREATOR OF NETWORKS, WOMAN IS BUILDER OF RELATIONSHIPS, WOMAN IS A WHOLE PERSON - NOT JUST A BODY, WOMAN IS HARDY, WOMAN IS A FRIEND, WOMAN IS THOUGHTFULNESS.

There is hope, because women and men from a variety of lifestyles and professions are becoming attuned to the nuances of language and its unethical use, particularly in the media, and have set about using language that more clearly portrays their values. Tom Stoppard challenges us in *The Real Thing*. "Words are sacred. They deserve respect. If you get the right ones, in the right order, you can nudge the world a little."

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