

ANALYSIS OF THE GENDER-CONCEPTUAL STRUCTURE  
IN THE MODERN ANGLO-AMERICAN CULTURE  
BASED ON THE COGNITIVE METAPHOR "NATURE IS WOMAN"

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**Rezumat**

*În articol, sunt supuse analizei mijloacele limbii engleze contemporane care servesc la personificarea Naturii. E vorba, în primul rând, de metafora cognitivă „Nature is Woman”/”Natura este Femeie” și de alte structuri conceptuale de gender de acest fel. Reieșind din faptul că orice personificare se face ținând cont de gen și sex, care, la rândul lor, se determină în baza unor principii culturale, autoarea susține că conceptul de Natură cuprinde atribute biologice, social-culturale și psihologice care aparțin începutului feminin, ceea ce permite de a include conceptul în cauză în categoria genului feminin și a folosi, în engleză, „she” („ea”) în calitate de pronume de co-referire al acestui concept.*

**Abstract**

*The article deals with the personification of Nature in modern English. The author attempted to carry out analysis of the cognitive metaphor Nature is Woman and the gender-conceptual structure in Anglo-American culture. Proceeding from the assumption that any personification is sexification that is cultural assumptions and beliefs underlie all kinds of personification, the writer claims that the concept of Nature comprises biological, social-cultural and psychological attributes pertaining to the feminine beginning which allows including the concept of Nature in the category of feminine gender and using 'she' as co-referring pronoun.*

Gender research takes its beginning in the feminism – the alternative philosophic conception of socio-cultural development based on the notion of “patriarchate”. Simone de Beauvoir in her book “The Second Sex” raised the problem of suppressing of the feminine in culture. The author has demonstrated that society constitutes the masculine as a positive cultural norm, and the feminine – as negative cultural norm, as deviation from the norm, as the Other. Great attention in feminist research is given to the existence of cultural-symbolic lines which include elements of masculine and feminine and arise from the opposition “nature – culture”. In this context, the masculine is considered as positive, dominant, significant, and the feminine – as negative, subordinate, secondary.

The aim of the given study is to investigate the gender-conceptual structure in the modern Anglo-American culture by means of the cognitive metaphor “Nature is Woman” and to prove that the language fixes the world picture from man’s point of view, where the feminine is presented mainly in the role of the object rather than the subject of action. The methodological basis of the investigation is formed by two theories: the theory of gender and the modern theory of metaphor by G. Lakoff and M. Johnson, in its interpretation.

In the process of cognition, objects, attributes and processes of both real and mental worlds are singled out from the surrounding reality and named. The entities of spiritual world include culture images, symbols, standards and stereotypes as well as accepted by the society values, ethic norms. Being cognitive-conceptual structures, they form the basis of the world picture, “which depends according to modern notion on the peculiarities of history and social order, nature, traditional kinds of activity and other forms of manifestation of the given national-cultural community.”<sup>1</sup>

Gender stereotypes that arise above biological-sex reality reflect the totality of biological attributes, social roles, peculiarities of psychology and behavior characteristic for the representatives of the given sex in the framework of the given culture. Applied to gender stereotypes, the terms ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ represent “conceptual metaphors that express internally contradictory, but dynamic correlation of the masculine and feminine substrata.”<sup>2</sup>

The manifestation of masculinity and femininity can be observed in most various spheres: “in behavior patterns, in different kinds of social activity as well as in language that describes

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<sup>1</sup>Городникова, 1999, с. 23-27.

<sup>2</sup>Халеева, 1999, с. 5-9.

these phenomena.”<sup>3</sup> The genderism is construed as the reality mediated by signs, symbols and texts singling out besides biological and social, cultural-symbolic component of gender which allows to identify as ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’ many phenomena not connected immediately with gender. Hence we can assume that “gender world picture” exists in each culture. This notion comprises the totality of representations that constitute such visualization of reality by a person where things, attributes and relations are categorized by means of binary oppositions whose sides are associated with male or female beginnings.

Among the reasons that are at the base of their (binary oppositions) functioning are two main characteristics of mental activity. The first feature is the very means of conceptualization of reality with the help of binary oppositions as the most habitual and “economic” form of organizing the world picture that originates in the opposition “we – they”. The second feature consists in the following: the whole world picture is always ‘personalized’ or anthropocentric which is manifested in allegoric, symbolic and metaphoric character of its images, for example the use of body metaphor. Since a human being is not neutral in relation to sex, a particular case of anthropomorphizing the world picture is ascribing gender characteristics to things and phenomena, correlating them with masculine or feminine attributes.

“If sex is apprehended in the categories ‘man’ and ‘woman’, gender is perceived in the terms ‘masculinity’ (masculine beginning) and ‘femininity’ (feminine beginning).”<sup>4</sup> However these notions exist in close interrelationship what has been demonstrated in the course of developing of cognitive linguistics: “the anthropocentric character” of language sign and categorization has been demonstrated – the categories of cognition are not determined by the nature of things, instead they are formed in the process of comprehending the world by a human being and his/her place in the world. Categorization occurs on the basis of experience, and being a physical creature a person’s experience is always connected with his/her body activity. Hence “body metaphor”<sup>5</sup> appears in a language. Body metaphor is defined as comprehending the world by means of your own body – the first sphere of human experience.

The connection of conceptual system with physical and cultural experience accounts for the principle of anthropomorphism that operates in the nominative system of language. In the given case we are interested in the nominations of ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’. They are found in all cosmogonist ideas of nations, being isomorphic with two parts of human existence – man and woman comprising a totality of opposite beginnings. A number of binary oppositions is present in any mythological world picture: top – bottom, light – darkness, right – left and so on. A number of polar categories also are found in many philosophic systems: culture – nature, activity – passivity, rationality – irrationality, logics – emotions, spirit – matter, power – submission.

The left member of each opposition is attributed to masculinity, the right one – to femininity. It is important to emphasize that each pair of attributes constitutes an independent opposition, without any cause – effect connection with belonging of people to either of sexes. However each sex is ascribed a set of corresponding qualities that play an important role in creating the prototype of masculine and feminine in collective and individual consciousness.

Thus, the concept of gender comprises besides social, cultural-symbolic component which means correlating with masculine and feminine beginnings of things, qualities and relations that are not directly connected with sex. For example, different phenomena can be subject to feminizing or masculinizing, such as: nation or country, social class, political enemy, elements of landscape etc.

The visions of masculinity and femininity are manifested on different levels of language system and functioning, including the grammatical category of gender. In conditions of personification of abstract nouns in English, gender is assigned to nouns on the basis of semantic-symbolic criteria. Thus, the nouns expressing the notions of grandeur, grace, sensibility, fertili-

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<sup>3</sup>Кирилина, 1999, p. 46-53.

<sup>4</sup>Рябов, 1997, p. 6.

<sup>5</sup>Lakoff *et alii*, 1980.

ty, gentleness, beauty etc. (for example, *spring, peace, kindness, dawn*), contextually are attributed to the feminine gender: «Earth has brought forth her fruit». <sup>6</sup> The nouns expressing the notions of strength, power, fierceness or destruction (for example, anger, death, fear, war) are attributed to the masculine gender: «War has shown his true face». <sup>7</sup>

Eva Feder Kittay has made the interesting argument that “women and women’s activities are a major source of metaphors through which men construct their sense of a distinct self, their relation to the world, and their relations to one another. Women do not draw on men and men’s activities in a similar way.” <sup>8</sup> There are many examples: the birth process, exclusively women’s domain, as a source for talking about creation and creativity; Mother Nature with both her bounty and her unpredictable and uncontrollable violence; the poetic muse who inspires, but cannot be relied upon. Kittay bases her argument on Simone de Beauvoir’s idea that men consider women as fundamentally Other, an Other sometimes desirable or admirable, sometimes frightening or deplorable, but always profoundly different from themselves.

In the modern Anglo-American culture Nature quite often is thought of as something endowed with feminine features. This peculiarity is reflected in the use of the third person singular pronoun *she* with *Nature* and in describing *Nature* in anthropomorphic terms which are traditionally connected with feminine beginning – ‘the beauty of Nature’, ‘Mother Nature’. The use of the feminine gender pronoun *she* in relation to *Nature* is observed mostly in conditions of personification in fiction, the examples will be given further. The investigation of language material allows to draw the conclusion about the existence of the metaphor ‘Nature is Woman’ in the Anglo-American conceptual sphere. The given metaphor lies in the basis of including the concept of *Nature* in the feminine gender category in conditions of personification.

In its primary meaning ‘nature’ is defined as “all the plants, animals and things that are not made by people” <sup>9</sup>, for example “the beauties of Nature”. The secondary meaning of *Nature* is the following: “the way that things happen in the physical world when it is not controlled by people” <sup>10</sup>, for example “the forces/laws of Nature”. The phrase “Mother Nature” is interpreted as “the natural world when you consider it as a force that affects the world and human beings” <sup>11</sup>. The analysis of the dictionary definitions allows to establish the basic attributes of the concept of *Nature*: physical world, wildlife, giving birth and providing subsistence, not made or caused by people, spontaneous, ruthless, powerful, uncontrolled, unrestrained. Part of these semes is associatively connected with the attributes that characterize the biological, social-cultural and psychological aspects of the concept of woman or feminine beginning in mythologic-philosophic interpretation.

Further we shall consider the use of the feminine gender pronoun *she* with the words *Nature, Spring, Earth* and *Grass* in conditions of personification in fiction in order to determine more exactly what associative connections lie in the basis of the likening of *Nature to woman*. Besides the lexeme *Nature* we have included in our analysis the lexemes *Spring, Earth* and *Grass* which are also personified as female beings and belong to the same thematic group. Here are some examples picked out from Anglo-American fiction:

(1) “The snow began in October that year and did not leave until the last of March. Wherever there were fences, the drifts piled high and obliterated them, so that one would not have known any had been built, - *Nature’s little joke, as though she were laughing at the settlers for their pains.*” (Aldrich, 1997, p. 109).

(2) “And now *Nature began to seem less parsimonious with her rains.* No longer was the sky a dry blue bowl turned over the *dry brown earth.* Heavy with moisture, the clouds gathered and fell in a *blessing of*

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<sup>6</sup>Карпышева *et alii*, 2002, p. 9.

<sup>7</sup>*ibidem*.

<sup>8</sup>Kittay, 1988, p. 63-86.

<sup>9</sup>OALD, 2000, p. 884.

<sup>10</sup>OALD, 2000, p. 884.

<sup>11</sup>OALD, 2000, p. 864.

*light showers or heavy, soaking rains. Out of Nature's benediction grew fine crops, better times, high land prices*" (Aldrich, 1997, p. 170).

(3) "Abbie drew her shawl closer around her and called pleasantly, "*Spring is here*." "Ya," shouted Gus. "She's come, all right. *Weather-breeder*, that's what she is." (Aldrich, 1997, p. 126).

(4) "He longed, nearly, for death, which was all that could release him from the cruelty of his chains... To go down into the grave, unwashed, unforgiven, was to go down into the pit forever, where terrors awaited him greater than any *the earth, for all her age and groaning, had ever borne*" (Baldwin, 1995, p. 114-115).

(5) "The first loam turned back, clean-cut with the sharp knife of the plowshare, mellow, black, as a crow's wing. *A fringe of coarse grass held fast to the heavy soil, as though the two could not be parted after all these wild, free centuries together, - the grass maiden clinging to the breast of her prairie lover.* [...] Because everything, - every little wild plum-blossom, every little tiny crocus and anemone and violet and *every tree-bud and grass-blade is working to help make the prairie nice*," Abbie told them" (Aldrich, 1997, p. 70, 81).

These examples demonstrate that *Nature* is perceived as the embodiment of feminine beginning. The analysis of the given examples shows that the basis of personifying *Nature* in feminine terms are attributes describing different aspects of the concept of woman – biological, social-cultural, psychological, as well as the meanings associated with feminine beginning in mythological-philosophic representation. While identifying concepts, their national-cultural specificity in the language consciousness of a people, the researchers quite often use the material of proverbs and sayings. Very precious stuff for identifying attributes of the concept of *Nature* is provided by in the proverbs collection "The Routledge Book of World Proverbs". The book contains proverbs of the British, American, Irish, Roman, German origin that are widely used in modern English. We have added to our analysis the interpretation of the meanings of these proverbs and sayings as it allows to better identify the attributes of the concept presented by the word *Nature*. The basis of metaphoric connection of the two conceptual spheres (*nature* and *woman*) is formed by the following semes and associative implications.

In terms of biological aspect a number of anthropomorphic meanings are actualized and projected onto the abstract notion of *Nature*, for instance:

- fertility (barrenness), reproductivity, the instinct of continuing genus – "crops were still-born in the womb of *Nature*", "dry brown earth", "out of *Nature's* benediction grew the crops...", "Weather-breeder, that's what she is.", "Nature abhors a vacuum";
- beauty, the object of visual attention, of esthetic pleasure for men – "every tree-bud and grass-blade is working to help make the prairie nice". We'd like to point out here that prairie is personified as *he*, that is a male person, because prairie is a piece of land which is not cultivated yet, is not used for growing crops, hence the attribute of fertility/barrenness does not apply. It proves once again the importance of biological semes in personifying *Nature and Earth*.

In terms of socio-cultural aspect the semes that are used in describing social role of mother and wife are activated in cases of personifying *Nature* such as: family, home, raising children, love, care, blessing, benediction, giving, generous, wisdom (not rationality but wisdom, rationality is man's prerogative) – "the grass maiden clinging to the breast of her prairie lover", "weather-breeder, that's what she is", "everything... is working to help make the prairie nice", "the clouds gathered and fell in a blessing of light showers or heavy, soaking rains. Out of *Nature's* benediction grew fine crops, better times, high land prices.", "Nature gives what no man can take away", "Nature herself makes the wise man wealthy", "Nature is a good mother", "Nature never says one thing and wisdom another", "Nature teaches one duty".

In terms of psychological-behavior aspect the meanings ascribed to *Nature* by metaphorical transfer from a female person are:

- a great force, unpredictable, uncontrolled, unrestrained, savage, changeable, capricious, chaotic – "Nature's little joke, as though she were laughing at the settlers for their pains", "parsimonious with her rains", "the corn began to curl and brown and bake on its roots",

“the sky a dry blue bowl turned over the dry brown earth”, “wherever there were fences, the drifts piled high and obliterated them, so that one would not have known any had been built”, “Nature and Nature’s laws lay hid in night”, “Nature draws stronger than seven oxen”, “Nature has granted man no better gift than the brevity of life”, “Nature trumps nurture”, “Nature will come through the claws, and the hound will follow the hare”, “Nature red in tooth and claw” (nature thought of as a savage force, a matter of fierce competition), “The greatest force is that of nature”, “We cannot command nature except by obeying her”, “You may drive out nature with a pitchfork, but she will keep coming back”.

- the psychology of victim, sacrifice, cult of suffering, patience – “where terrors awaited him greater than any the earth, for all her age and groaning, had ever borne”. The given peculiarity of psychology and behavior arises from the woman’s social function of maintaining balance in family and bringing up children. The masculine and feminine types of behavior are described by means of binary oppositions such as self-orientation versus family-orientation, self-model versus other-model.

Thus, the analyzed examples allow to claim that the concept of *Nature* comprises biological, social-cultural and psychological semes as well as attributes pertaining to the feminine beginning. Ascribing anthropomorphic meanings to the abstract notion of *Nature* is accounted for by existing in the Anglo-American culture of the cognitive metaphor ‘Nature is Woman’ which contributes to the personifying of *Nature* as female human being.

At the basis of metaphoric connection of the two conceptual spheres lie the following semes: fertility (barrenness), reproductivity, the instinct of continuing genus, beauty, the object of visual attention, of esthetic pleasure for men; family, home, raising children, love, care, blessing, benediction; unpredictable, uncontrolled, unrestrained, changeable, capricious, chaotic; the psychology of victim, sacrifice, cult of suffering, patience. These semes form associative basis for the metaphor ‘Nature is Woman’. The use of these semes for personifying an abstract notion as woman implies that these attributes are important for perceiving the feminine beginning. Consequently the metaphor ‘Nature is Woman’ lies at the basis of including the concept of *Nature* in the category of feminine gender in modern English which is expressed in the use of *she* as co-referring pronoun.

At the same time the asymmetry of binary gender structure nowadays looks as anachronism. One feels the need to overhaul gender cognitive-conceptual structure in the modern Anglo-American culture. “Personification is really sexification, just as to pronominalize in the third person is really to sexualize... there is a similar kind of sexism with personification as with generic reference traditionally ... cultural assumptions and beliefs underlie all kinds of personification.”<sup>12</sup> The main principle of gender approach in linguistics is that masculinity and femininity are not biologically determined phenomena but “dynamic, changing products of the development of human society, subject to social manipulating and modeling and to the strong influence of cultural tradition.”<sup>13</sup>

An important question is how metaphors of gender/sexuality function in particular communities of practice. Lenora Timm examines the issue of the prevalence of the “mother earth” metaphor in recent discussions of ecology and the future of our environment. Timm believes that the mother earth figure is problematic on two grounds. First, it is unlikely to promote the ecological responsibility that is needed. “The earth is neither a powerful and bountiful mother nor a sexy goddess who will take care of ‘her’ children if they are good and obedient and love her, or punish them if they misbehave and abuse her.”<sup>14</sup> Using the mother earth metaphor does not, she argues, contribute to the kind of thoughtful attention to interconnectedness that is needed. Women in general and mothers in particular often have been devalued and denigrated. Second, L. Timm suggests that the continued use of Nature is Woman metaphor “implicitly sanctions the view of sex/gender roles as biologically determined.”

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<sup>12</sup>Wales, 1996, p. 147-149.

<sup>13</sup>Кирилина, 2000, p. 369.

<sup>14</sup>Timm, 2000, p. 105-118.

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