Women, fire and dangerous things in the Hebrew Bible: Insights from the cognitive theory of metaphor

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ABSTRACT

The article focuses on the conceptualisation of anger and lust in American English and Classical Hebrew. By comparing the metaphor systems of these emotions in English with those found in the Hebrew Bible, culturally specific dimensions of metaphorical conceptualisation and expression of emotion and attitudes are investigated. In both languages anger and lust share several source domains, a characteristic which indicates that they can be conceptually linked. The main meaning foci of these metaphors in English and Hebrew are diverse, however, and should be seen as products of peculiar cultural experience.

A INTRODUCTION

The value of the cognitive linguistic approach to the study of emotion in the Hebrew Bible has been demonstrated by a few investigations in recent years (cf. Kruger 2000a; 2000b; Kotzé 2004). Kruger (2000a), for example, has demonstrated that the conceptual structure of anger metaphors in Hebrew shows remarkable similarities to that found in American English. These similarities can be ascribed to the fact that abstract mental processes are fundamentally metaphoric in nature (cf. Lakoff & Johnson 1980; Lakoff 1987; Johnson 1987; Grady 1999; Lakoff & Johnson 1999; Fauconnier & Turner 2002) and that the emotional experience is largely universal (cf. Ekman, Levenson & Friesen 1983; Levenson et al 1992; Kövecses 1995).

The fact that folk theories of emotions of various cultures demonstrate remarkable similarities does not mean that one can close the eye to the influence of cultural experience. Quinn (1991) has emphasised the fact that cultural understanding underlies the use of metaphor. In the ensuing part of the investigation, the concepts of anger and lust in English will be compared with those found in the Hebrew Bible. To demonstrate the importance of an understanding of emotion concepts to the treatment of societal problems the relevance of these concepts to the phenomenon of rape will also be considered.

B ANGER, LUST AND RAPE IN AMERICAN ENGLISH

Anger is one of the most widely studied emotions in the discipline of cognitive linguistics (cf. Kövecses 1995; Matsuki 1995; Yu 1995; Mikolajczuk 1998;
Taylor & Mbense 1998; Kruger 2000a; Kotzé 2004). A prominent source domain which is found in almost all languages studied to date is HEAT. In American English the concept of anger is commonly expressed by phrases such as (Kövecses 1990:52):

- Don’t get hot under the collar.
- Billy is a hothead.
- They were having a heated argument.
- When the cop gave her a ticket, she got all hot and bothered.

According to Kövecses (1990:52-59) this ANGER-IS-HEAT metaphor is encountered in two versions in the English language. When applied to fluids, we get: ANGER IS THE HEAT OF A FLUID IN A CONTAINER (Kövecses 1990:53):

- You make my blood boil.
- Simmer down.
- I had reached the boiling point.
- Let him stew.

When applied to solids, we get the version ANGER IS FIRE, which is motivated by the heat and redness aspects of the cultural theory of bodily effects of this emotion (Kövecses 1990:58):

- Those are inflammatory remarks.
- She was doing a slow burn.
- He was breathing fire.
- Your insincere apology just added fuel to the fire.

However, the use of FIRE as a source domain for metaphoric transfer is not restricted to the emotion of anger. It is a very productive donor for the conceptualisation of a wide range of emotions (Kövecses 2000:84). In all of these expressions the concept of HEAT predominates so that we can generalise by assuming the metaphor EMOTION IS THE HEAT OF FIRE (Kövecses 2000:84-86):

- Dan burned to know what the reason could be. [CURIOSITY-DESIRE]
- The trial left him with a burning sense of injustice. [INDIGNATION-ANGER]
- The lady was ten years his senior. It was a fiery relationship. [RELATIONSHIP-LOVE]
- … keeping the flames of love alive. [LOVE]
- … fueling the flames of hatred. [HATRED]
- Melanie Griffith seems to smoulder with sexuality. [SEXUALITY-LUST]
- … Isabella Rosselini, the smouldering daughter of actress Ingrid Bergman. [SEXUALITY-LUST]

As these expressions demonstrate, the main meaning focus of the metaphor EMOTION IS THE HEAT OF FIRE, is emotional intensity (Kövecses 2000:86).
The fact that the same source domain is utilised for the conceptualisation of various emotions may not be without import. One of the major discoveries of cognitive science is that most of our thinking is unconscious in the sense that it operates beneath the level of cognitive awareness, inaccessible to consciousness and operating too quickly to be focused on (Lakoff & Johnson 1999:9-15). It is therefore not surprising that scholars have found that emotion concepts are of enormous social importance. With regard to the use of the HEAT metaphor as a common source domain for anger and lust, Lakoff (1987:409) has argued that it may be conducive to the high incidence of rape in English speaking countries:

Not all cultures have a high incidence of rape. In some cultures, rape is virtually unknown. The high incidence of rape in America undoubtedly has many complex causes. I would like to suggest that the way we conceptualise lust and anger, together with our various folk theories of sexuality, may be a contributing factor.

Lakoff (1987:409-411) goes on to demonstrate that the source domains used to conceptualise lust overlap remarkably with the source domains of metaphors for anger. Examples of shared source domains are not only HEAT, but also WILD ANIMAL, INSANITY and OPPONENT IN A STRUGGLE (cf Kövecses 1990:59-62):

**WILD ANIMAL**
- He has a ferocious anger. [ANGER]
- He unleashed his anger. [ANGER]
- He has a monstrous temper. [ANGER]
- Don’t touch me, you animal! [LUST]
- Stop pawing me! [LUST]
- He’s a real stud – the Italian Stallion! [LUST]
- She looks like a bitch in heat. [LUST]

**INSANITY**
- I just touched him, and he went crazy. [ANGER]
- You’re driving me nuts. [ANGER]
- One more complaint and I’ll go berserk. [ANGER]
- I’m crazy about her. [LUST]
- I’m madly in love with him. [LUST]
- She’s sex-crazed. [LUST]

**OPPONENT IN A STRUGGLE**
- I’m struggling with my anger. [ANGER]
- I was seized by anger. [ANGER]
- Anger yielded to his anger. [ANGER]
- She’s devastating. [LUST]
- She bowled me over. [LUST]
- She’s dressed to kill. [LUST]

Lakoff argues that the isomorphism in schemas suggest that sex and violence are linked in the American mind via these metaphors (Lakoff 1987:412):
Since sex and violence are conceptually anything but mutually exclusive, it is quite conceivable that rape is not a matter of violence alone and that it may have a lot to do with lust and the fact that the metaphorical understanding of lust shares a considerable amount with the metaphorical understanding of anger.

Lakoff then goes on to demonstrate how these concepts indeed are related in the minds of ordinary American men (Lakoff 1987:412-415). Analysing some discourse of a mild-mannered librarian of San Francisco, Lakoff shows that men may interpret women being attractive, as exerting a force on them that make them feel less than human since they are not allowed to act on the impulses that she stimulates. This ‘dehumanisation’ is further equated with injury, which demands retribution to restore the balance (Lakoff 1987:414):

Since the injury involves the use of sexual power, he sees rape as a possibility for appropriate redress … Here the overlap between lust and anger is even stronger. Our concept of anger carries with it the concept of revenge, as well as the idea of insane, heated, animal behaviour. In this particular logic of rape, lust and anger go hand-in-hand.

These views, although despicable, are ingrained in American culture. All of the metaphors and folk theories listed above are recurrent and in everyday use. Moreover, they are not limited to American men. Lakoff (1987:414-415) points out that ‘women on juries in rape trials regularly view rape victims who were attractively dressed as “asking for it” or bringing it upon themselves and therefore deserving of their fate.’

In view of this particular American logic of rape, anger and lust it may be of value to consider an alternative view of the concepts of anger and lust to see if and how they may impact on the folk theory of rape.

C WOMEN, FIRE AND DANGEROUS THINGS IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

The ideal cognitive model of lust in the Hebrew Bible seems to be rich and diverse with metaphors from the domains of eating, drinking, fauna and flora (cf Can 1:2; 1:9; 1:15; 2:2; 2:13). Sweet fruit and honey seem to hint at the tastiness of the woman from which the pleasures of sex is derived (cf Emanatian 1995:168):

\[\text{The fig tree ripens its green figs and the vines and tender grapes give off a good scent} \] (Can 2:13).

‘Your lips drip like a honeycomb, my bride; honey and milk is under your tongue’ (Can 4:11).


‘The lips of a foreign woman drip honey and her mouth is smoother than oil’ (Pr 5:3).

The use of precious liquids as source domain for lust is also common in the Hebrew Bible:

V: kiss (qal impf 3rd sg, m) + pron suffix (1st sg)  P: from  N: kisses  N: mouth + pron suffix (3rd sg, m)  C: for  A: good (pl, m)  N: love (pl, m) + pron suffix (2nd sg, m)  P (comparative): than  N: wine.

‘Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth, for your love is better than wine’ (Can 1:2).


‘How much better is your love than wine and the smell of your ointments than all fragrances’ (Can 4:10).

Other metaphors include thirst and weakness:


‘Drink water from your own cistern and streams of water from your own well’ (Pr 5:15).

V: be weak, sick (qal pt sg, f, cs)  N: love  Pronoun: I.

‘I am sick with love’ (Can 2:5).
These beguiling metaphors for the emotion of lust stand in stark contrast to the defeatist view of women that is found in some ancient Near Eastern texts, including the Hebrew Bible. In ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia the warning of the sages against foreign or single women seem to have been motivated by socio-economic implications (Aitken 1995:214; Assante 1998:53-86). In the Hebrew Bible lust for the forbidden woman is depicted in imagery commonly used to conceptualise anger. For example, in Proverbs 6:25-27 the source domain of fire, which is also commonly used for anger (cf Dt 4:24; Is 30:27; 66:15; Ps 79:5; 89:47), stands in the context of a warning against lust after the foreign woman:

Do not desire her beauty in your heart and don’t let her take you with her eyelids … Can a man take fire in his lap and his clothes not burn?’ (Pr 6:25, 27).

At first glance the allusion to fire may seem to be a metaphor for sexual passion (cf Murphy 1998:39). Some commentators have also pointed to the possible word play on the similar sounding שָׁנָה (v 27) ‘fire’ and נְאָה, ‘woman’ (v 26) (Clifford 1999:80). According to this interpretation, FIRE indicates the intensity of the man’s passion. Failure to control his desire corresponds to ‘stealing’ (v 30) this wife of another man (Whybray 1994:108; also see Van Dyk 2003:101). Seen in this way, these verses may seem to correspond to the idealised cognitive model of anger, lust and rape in American English. The woman provokes the man to intense lust and anger because he cannot really have her. The natural thing to do would then be to ‘steal’ her by raping her. However, rape does not appear to suit the context (Plöger 1984:72):

Further, nowhere in the Hebrew Bible is FIRE used as a metaphor for sexual passion as in American English. By contrast, the FIRE metaphor in the Hebrew Bible limits itself to target concepts that relate to the notion of destruction, such as distress in war (Nm 21:28; Is 10:16; Ps 78:63), judgement (Is 66:11), chasing
the defeated enemy (1 Sm 17:53; Lm 4:19; cf Wenham 1994:277) and anger (see Hamp 1974:423-425). In Proverbs 6 it is used as a figure for the destructive rage of a jealous husband (Plöger 1984:71; Whybray 1994:109; Peels 1994:270-274; Van Leeuwen 1997:81; Clifford 1999:81):

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For jealousy arouses a husband’s fury, and he will show no mercy when he takes revenge’ (Pr 6:34).

It is in this context that other metaphors for the adulterous woman with the main meaning focus of destruction should be understood. In Proverbs 5:3-4 the domains of ‘poison’ (cf Cohen 1971:702-704), the ‘sword’ (חרם) and ‘death’ (موت) are encountered. All these images are commonly used of anger (cf Dt 29:17; Jr 9:14-15; 25:27; Lm 3:19; Ps 7:12-14; 76:4):

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But her end is poisonous as wormwood, sharp as a two-edged sword. Her feet go down to death and her steps reach to the underworld’ (Pr 5:4-5).

Interestingly, in Canticles 8:6 this rage is equated with love:

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For love is as strong as death, its jealousy unyielding as the grave’ (Can 8:6; NIV).

Thus, although the sages often warn young men against women in the wisdom literature of the Hebrew Bible, the risk involved seems to be associated with possible punishment for immorality by the woman’s family and society as a whole (also see Peels 1994:270-274):
hence may have to provide for her for the rest of her life, or alternatively may have to accept a lower bride’s price for her. Second, the marriage rights of her husband, or the man betrothed to her, were violated by the raping of a woman. When a married or betrothed woman was raped (i.e., the woman was outside the city and screamed, but nobody could hear her), the rapist was put to death (Dt 22:25), because he had violated the sexual rights of the husband or future husband (Van Dyk 2003:101).

This means that even active seduction was to be avoided by the wise young man who valued his life. Therefore, even though seduction may imply disrespect and ‘injury’ from the part of the woman (cf Pr 6:26), a sensible man would not even consider rape as an option to redress the situation.

D CONCLUSION

By comparing the Classical Hebrew conceptualisation of anger and lust to that of English one gets some feel for the culturally specific dimensions of emotions and attitudes. Despite the differences, there are rather conspicuous similarities. Both cultures think of anger and lust as some force that needs to be avoided. While the English metaphors focus on the aspect of emotional intensity, the Hebrew metaphors centre on the facet of destruction that also signals a much stronger warning against lust for a woman that is married or betrothed. Notwithstanding these negative concepts, the Hebrew Bible seems to abound in enchanting metaphors for lust and sex that is experienced within the parameters of acceptable behaviour set by the ancient Israelite culture.

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