

Understanding Women's Movement in the Late 20th Century

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Abstract

Féminité and écriture feminine are problematic as well as powerful concepts. They have been criticized as idealist and essentialist, bound up in the very system they claim to undermine; they have been attacked as theoretically fuzzy and as fatal to constructive political action. However, by now the French, American, and British approaches have so thoroughly critiqued, influenced, and assimilated one another that the work of most Western practitioners is no longer easily identifiable along national boundary lines. On the other hand, women are not a homogeneous group and certainly are not alike as there are differences. Women are differently located within global and local social contexts and differently represented in art, literature and other media. Distinctions of nationality, ethnicity, education, language, family, class, employment, ability/ disability and sexuality are important. These are not merely differences, which can be acknowledged and passed over. These differences are hierarchical, producing inequalities among women which intersect with gender inequality.

Key Words: Gender equality, écriture feminine, distinctions, sexuality, language

Introduction

Feminist Theory seeks to analyse the conditions which shapes women's lives and to explore cultural understandings on what it means to be a woman. It was initially guided by the political aims of the Women's Movement – the need to understand women's subordination and exclusion from, or marginalization within, a variety of cultural and social arenas. Feminists refuse to accept that the inequalities between men and women are natural and inevitable and insist that they should be questioned. Theory, then for women, is not an abstract intellectual activity divorced from women's lives, but seeks to explain

those conditions under which those lives are lived. Developing this understanding has entailed looking at the material actualities of women's everyday experience and examining the ways in which we are represented and represent ourselves within a range of cultural practices, such as the arts and the media.

Because women have historically lived in male-dominated societies, women have more often been the objects of knowledge than the producers of it. As a result, much of what has been passed as objective knowledge of the world has been produced by men- and usually white, middle class and heterosexual men. Feminist modes of theorizing

contest androcentric (or male-centred) ways of knowing, calling into question the gendered hierarchy of society and culture. Feminist theory is about thinking for ‘ourselves’- women generating knowledge about women and gender for women. Yet this immediately raises questions. Who are the ‘we’ doing the thinking and who are the ‘ourselves’ for whom we claim to be thinking: women in general or only some women? Are certain women being left out of the picture? Are we not in danger of perpetuating the same faults that we have criticized in male thinkers- of marginalizing women not like ‘ourselves’, casting them as the ‘other’?

Feminism in France

Feminism in France has its origins in the French Revolution in 1789 and subsequently saw the ups and downs of what any other Feminist movement would have faced in any other part of the world. As with any other country or region Feminism first started in France as a voice against the suppression of women, their need to be heard, and of marginalization within French society.

French feminism of the late 20th century is mainly associated with the psychoanalytical Feminist theory and Post-structural feminism, notably with the thinking of Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous.

Julia Kristeva (born 24 June 1941) is a Bulgarian-French philosopher, literary critic, psychoanalyst, sociologist, feminist, and novelist, who has lived in France since the mid-1960s. She became

influential in international critical analysis, cultural theory and feminism after publishing her first book *Semeiotikè* in 1969. Together with Roland Barthes, Todorov, Goldmann, Gérard Genette, Lévi-Strauss, Lacan, Greimas, and Althusser, she stands as one of the foremost structuralists in that time when structuralism took a major place in humanities. Her works also have an important place in post-structuralist thought.

Julia Kristeva, finds in psychoanalysis the concept of the bodily drives that survive cultural pressures toward sublimation that she calls ‘semiotic discourse’. This could be read as the gestural, rhythmic, pre-referential language of writers like Joyce, Mallarmé, and Artaud. These men, rather than giving up their blissful infantile fusion with their mothers, (their orality and anality) re-experience such *jouissances* subconsciously and set them into play by constructing texts against the rules and regularities of conventional language. Women fit into this scheme of semiotic liberation indirectly as mothers, because they are the first love objects from which the child is separated and turned away in the course of initiation into society. In fact, for Kristeva semiotic discourse is an incestuous challenge to the symbolic order, asserting as it does the writer’s return to the pleasures of his preverbal identification with his mother and his refusal to identify with his father and the logic of paternal discourse.

Kristeva doubts, however, whether women should aim to work out alternative discourses. She says that rather than formulating a new discourse, women should persist in challenging the discourses that stand: Kristeva says that if woman have a role to play, then it is only in assuming a *negative* function: reject everything finite, definite, structured, and loaded with meaning, in the existing state of society. Such an attitude places women on the side of the explosion of social codes: with revolutionary movements. ‘Woman’ to Kristeva represents not so much a sex as an attitude, embodying any resistance to conventional culture and language to which men can also have an access (to the *jouissance* that opposes phallocentrism).

For Luce Irigaray, on the contrary, women have a specificity that distinguishes them sharply from men. A psychoanalyst and a former member of the *Ecole freudienne* at the University of Paris (Vincennes), she was dismissed from her teaching position in the fall of 1974, three weeks after the publication of her study of the phallocentric bias in Freud called *Speculum de l'autre femme*, a profound and wittily sarcastic demonstration of the ways in which Plato and Freud define woman: as irrational and invisible, as imperfect (castrated) man. In later essays she continues her argument that women, because they have been caught in a world structured by male-centered concepts, had no way of knowing or representing themselves. But she offers

as the starting point for a female self-consciousness the facts of woman’s bodies and women’s sexual pleasure, precisely because they are so absent or so misrepresented in male discourse. Woman, she says, experience a diffuse sexuality arising, for example, from the ‘two lips’ of the vulva, and a multiplicity of libidinal energies that cannot be expressed or understood within the identity-claiming assumptions of phallocentric discourse (‘I am a unified, coherent being, and what is significant in the world reflects my male image’). Irigaray argues that female sexuality explains women’s problematic relationship to (masculine) logic and language. She says that “Woman has sex organs everywhere. She experiences pleasure almost everywhere...”

Irigaray concedes that women’s discovery of their autoeroticism will not, by itself, arrive automatically or enable them to transform the existing order: ‘For woman to arrive at the point where she can enjoy her pleasure as a woman, a long detour by the analysis of the various systems that oppress her is certainly necessary.’ Irigaray herself writes essays using Marxist categories to analyse men’s use and exchange of women, and in others she uses female physiology as a source of critical metaphors and counter concepts (against physics, pornography, Nietzsche’s misogyny, myth), rather than literally. Yet her focus on the physical bases for the difference between male and physical sexuality remains the same, that, women must recognize and assert

their *jouissance* if they were to subvert phallocentric oppression at its deepest levels.

Along with Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, **Cixous** is considered one of the stalwarts of poststructuralist feminist theory. In the 1970s, Cixous began writing about the relationship between sexuality and language.

She like Kristeva admires male writers like Joyce and Genet who have produced anti-phallocentric texts. But she is convinced that women's consciousness is totally different from men's, and that it is their psychosexual specificity that will empower women to overthrow masculinist ideologies and to create new female discourses. Of her own writing she says, 'Je suis là où ça parle' ('I am there where it/the female unconscious speaks'). She has produced a series of analyses of women's suffering under the laws of male sexuality (the first-person narrative *Angst*, the play *Portrait de Dora*, the liberetto for the opera *Le Nom d'Oedipe*) and a growing collection of demonstrations of what id-liberated female discourses might be: *La, Ananké*, and *Illa*. In her *Vivre l'orange* (1979), she celebrates the Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector for what she sees as a peculiarly female attentiveness to objects, the ability to perceive and represent them in a nurturing rather than dominating way. She believes that this empathetic attentiveness and literary modes, to which it gives rise, arise from libidinal rather than sociocultural sources.

Cixous criticizes psychoanalysis for its 'thesis of a "natural" anatomical determination of sexual difference-opposition', focusing on physical drives rather than body parts for her definition of male-female contrasts: 'It is at the level of sexual pleasure in my opinion that the difference makes itself most clearly apparent in as far as woman's libidinal economy is neither identifiable by a man nor referable to the masculine economy.' In her manifesto for *l'écriture féminine*, 'The Laugh of the Medusa' (1975), her comparisons and lyricism suggest that she admires in women a sexuality that is remarkably constant and almost mystically superior to the phallic single-mindedness it transcends:

Though masculine sexuality gravitates around the penis, engendering that centralized body (in political anatomy under the dictatorship of its parts, woman does not bring about the same regionalization which serves the couple head/genitals and which is inscribed only within boundaries. Her libido is cosmic, just as her unconscious is worldwide.

She continues, in terms close to Irigaray's, to link women's diffuse sexuality to women's language – written language, in this case:

Her writing can only keep going, without ever inscribing or discerning contours. ... She lets the other speak – the language of 1,000 tongues which knows neither enclosure nor death. ... Her language does not contain, it carries; it does not hold back, it makes possible.

She carries on further to talk about other bodily drives (called *pulsions* in the French) in a continuum with women's self-expression:

Oral drives, anal drive, vocal drive – these drives are our strengths, and among them is the gestation drive – just like the desire to write: a desire to live self from within, a desire for the swollen belly, for language, for blood.

In her theoretical and imaginative writing alike (*La Jeune Née*, 1975), she typically combines the two) Cixous insists on the primacy of multiple, specifically female libidinal impulses in women's unconscious and in the writing of the liberatory female discourses of the future.

What Kristeva, Irigaray, and Cixous do in common, then, is to oppose women's bodily experience (or, in Kristeva's case, women's bodily effect as mothers) to the phallic-symbolic patterns embedded in Western thought. Although Kristeva does not privilege women as the only possessors of pre phallocentric discourse, Irigaray and Cixous go further: if women are to discover and express who they are, to bring to the surface what masculine history has repressed in them, they must begin with their sexuality. And their sexuality begins with their bodies, with their genital and libidinal difference from men.

For various reasons, this is a powerful argument. And versions of this can be seen in the radical feminism of the United States, too. In the French context,

it offers hope in the void left by the deconstruction of humanism, which has been revealed as an ideologically suspect invention by men. If men are responsible for the reigning binary system of meaning which is seen in: identity/other, man/nature, reason/chaos, man/woman, then women, relegated to the negative and passive pole of this hierarchy, are not implicated in the creation of its myths. And the immediacy with which the body, the id, *jouissance*, are supposedly experienced promises a clarity of perception and a vitality that can bring down mountains of phallocentric delusion. Finally, to the extent that the female body is seen as a direct source of female writing, a powerful alternative discourse seems possible: to write from the body is to re-create the world.

But *féminité* and *écriture feminine* are problematic as well as powerful concepts. They have been criticized as idealist and essentialist, bound up in the very system they claim to undermine; they have been attacked as theoretically fuzzy and as fatal to constructive political action. All these objections are worth making, especially they must be made if American women are to sift out and use the positive elements in French thinking about *féminité*.

Difference between French, British And American Feminism

Feminist theory is not, and has never been, a static phenomenon. This is one reason why it has proved so difficult to capture within classifications such as

'liberal', 'marxist' or 'radical'. Diversity and change are interlinked. As feminism has evolved, theorizing has taken many different directions and forms. Individual feminists have also changed their views over time and this is evident in the reflexive, self-critical tenor of much feminist work. Feminists are constantly reflecting on their own ideas, changing their stances in response to debates and challenges from other feminists. Hence individual theorists cannot always be pinned down to a single statement of their position, since this is continuously being developed and modified.

Until a few years ago, however, feminist thought tended to be classified not according to topic but, rather, according to country of origin. This practice reflected the fact that, during the 1970s and early 1980s, French, American, and British feminists wrote from somewhat different perspectives.

The difference is that French feminists tended to focus their attention on language, analyzing the ways in which meaning is produced. They concluded that language as we commonly think of it is a decidedly male realm. Drawing on the ideas of the psychoanalytic philosopher Jacques Lacan, they asserted that language is a realm of public discourse. A child enters the linguistic realm just as it comes to grasp its separateness from its mother, just about the time that boys identify with their father, the family representative of culture. The language learned reflects a binary logic that opposes such terms as

active/passive, masculine/feminine, sun/moon, father/mother, head/heart, son/daughter, intelligent/ sensitive, brother/sister, form/matter, phallus/vagina, reason/emotion. Because this logic tends to group with masculinity such qualities as light, thought, and activity, French feminists said that the structure of language is phallocentric: it privileges the phallus and, more generally, masculinity by associating them with things and values more appreciated by the (masculine-dominated) culture. Moreover, French feminists suggested, "masculine desire dominates speech and posits woman as an idealized fantasy-fulfillment for the incurable emotional lack caused by separation from the mother". French feminists associated language with separation from the mother. Its distinctions, they argued, represent the world from the male point of view. Language systematically forces women to choose: either they can imagine and represent themselves as men imagine and represent them (in which case they may speak, but will speak as men) or they can choose "silence," becoming in the process "the invisible and unheard sex".

But some influential French feminists maintained that language only seems to give women such a narrow range of choices. There is another possibility, namely, that women can develop a feminine language. In various ways, early French feminists such as Annie Leclerc, Xavière Gauthier, and Marguerite Duras have opined that there

is something that may be called *l'écriture féminine*: women's writing. More recently, Julia Kristeva has said that feminine language is "semiotic," not "symbolic." Rather than rigidly opposing and ranking elements of reality, rather than symbolizing one thing but not another in terms of a third, feminine language is rhythmic and unifying. If from the male perspective it seems fluid to the point of being chaotic, then that is a fault of the male perspective.

According to Kristeva, feminine language is derived from the pre-oedipal period of fusion between mother and child. Associated with the maternal, feminine language is not only a threat to culture, which is patriarchal, but also a medium through which women may be creative in new ways. But Kristeva paired her central, liberating claim - that truly feminist innovation in all fields requires an understanding of the relation between maternity and feminine creation. But, she says a feminist language that refuses to participate in "masculine" discourse, that places its nature entirely in a feminine, semiotic discourse, risks being politically marginalized by men. That is to say, it risks being relegated to the outskirts of what is considered socially and politically significant.

Kristeva, who associated feminine writing with the female body, was joined in her views by other leading French feminists. Hélène Cixous, for instance, also posited an essential connection between the woman's body, whose sexual pleasure has been repressed and

denied expression, and women's writing. "Write yourself. Your body must be heard," Cixous urged; once they learn to write their bodies, women will not only realize their sexuality but enter history and move toward a future based on a "feminine" economy of giving rather than the "masculine" economy of hoarding.

For Luce Irigaray, women's sexual pleasure (*jouissance*) cannot be expressed by the dominant, ordered, "logical," masculine language. Irigaray explored the connection between women's sexuality and women's language through the following analogy: as women's *jouissance* is more multiple than men's unitary, phallic pleasure ("woman has sex organs just about everywhere"), so "feminine" language is more diffusive than its "masculine" counterpart. ("That is undoubtedly the reason . . . her language . . . goes off in all directions and ... he is unable to discern the coherence," writes Irigaray writes).

Cixous's and Irigaray's emphasis on feminine writing as an expression of the female body drew criticism from other French feminists. Many argued that an emphasis on the body either reduces "the feminine" to a biological essence or elevates it in a way that shifts the valuation of masculine and feminine but retains the binary categories. For Christine Faure, Irigaray's celebration of women's difference failed to address the issue of masculine dominance, and a Marxist-feminist. Catherine Clement warned that "poetic" descriptions of

what constitutes the feminine will not challenge that dominance in the realm of production. In her effort to redefine women as political rather than as sexual beings, Monique Wittig called for the abolition of the sexual categories that Cixous and Irigaray retained and revalued as they celebrated women's writing.

American feminist critics of the 1970s and early 1980s shared with French critics both an interest in and a cautious distrust of the concept of feminine writing. Annette Kolodny, for instance, worried that the "richness and variety of women's writing" will be missed if we see in it only its "feminine mode" or "style". And yet Kolodny herself proceeded, in the same essay, to point out that women have had their own style, which includes reflexive constructions ("she found herself crying") and particular, recurring themes (clothing and self-fashioning are mentioned by Kolodny; other American feminists have focused on madness, disease, and the demonic).

Interested as they became in the "French" subject of feminine style, American feminist critics began by analyzing literary texts rather than philosophizing abstractly about language. Many reviewed the great works by male writers, embarking on a revisionist rereading of literary tradition. These critics examined the portrayals of women characters, exposing the patriarchal ideology implicit in such works and showing how clearly this tradition of systematic masculine

dominance is inscribed in our literary tradition. Kate Millett, Carolyn Heilbrun, and Judith Fetterley, among many others, created this model for American feminist criticism, a model that Elaine Showalter came to call "the feminist critique" of "male-constructed literary history".

Meanwhile another group of critics including Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar, Patricia Meyer Spacks, and Showalter herself created a somewhat different model. Whereas feminists writing "feminist critique" analyzed works by men, practitioners of what Showalter used to refer to as "gynocriticism" studied the writings of those women who, against all odds, produced what she calls "a literature of their own." In *The Female Imagination* (1975), Spacks examined the female literary tradition to find out how great women writers across the ages have felt, perceived themselves, and imagined reality. Gilbert and Gubar, in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), concerned themselves with well-known women writers of the nineteenth century, but they too found that general concerns, images, and themes recur, because the authors that they wrote about lived "in a culture whose fundamental definitions of literary authority" were "both overtly and covertly patriarchal".

If one of the purposes of gynocriticism was to (re)study well-known women authors, another was to rediscover women's history and culture, particularly women's communities that nurtured female creativity. Still another related purpose was to discover neglected or

forgotten women writers and thus to forge an alternative literary tradition, a canon that better represents the female perspective by better representing the literary works that have been written by women. Showalter, in *A Literature of Their Own* (1977), admirably began to fulfill this purpose, providing a remarkably comprehensive overview of women's writing through three of its phases. She defined these as the "Feminine, Feminist, and Female" phases, phases during which women first imitated a masculine tradition (1840-80), then protested against its standards and values (1880-1920), and finally advocated their own autonomous, female perspective (1920 to the present).

With the recovery of a body of women's texts, attention returned to a question raised in 1978 by Lillian Robinson: Shouldn't feminist criticism need to formulate a theory of its own practice? Won't reliance on theoretical assumptions, categories, and strategies developed by men and associated with non-feminist schools of thought prevent feminism from being accepted as equivalent to these other critical discourses? Not all American feminists came to believe that a special or unifying theory of feminist practice was urgently needed; Showalter's historical approach to women's culture allowed a feminist critic to use theories based on non-feminist disciplines. Kolodny advocated a "playful pluralism" that encompasses a variety of critical schools and methods. But Jane Marcus and others responded that if feminists adopt too wide a range

of approaches, they may relax the tensions between feminists and the educational establishment necessary for political activism.

The question of whether feminism weakens or strengthens itself by emphasizing its separateness - and by developing unity through separateness - was one of several areas of debate within American feminism during the 1970s and early 1980s. Another area of divergence touched on earlier, between feminists who stress universal feminine attributes (the feminine imagination, feminine writing) and those who focus on the political conditions experienced by certain groups of women at certain times in history, paralleled a larger distinction between American feminist critics and their British counterparts.

While it gradually became customary to refer to an Anglo-American tradition of feminist criticism, British feminists tended to distinguish themselves from what they saw as an American overemphasis on texts linking women across boundaries and decades and an under emphasis on popular art and culture. They regarded their own critical practice as more political than that of North American feminists, whom they sometimes faulted for being uninterested in historical detail. They joined such American critics as Myra Jehlen in suggesting that a continuing preoccupation with women writers may bring about the dangerous result of placing women's texts outside the history that conditions them.

British feminists felt that the American opposition to male stereotypes that denigrate women often leads to counter-stereotypes of feminine virtue that ignore real differences of race, class, and culture among women. In addition, they argued that American celebrations of individual heroines falsely suggest that powerful individuals may be immune to repressive conditions and may even imply that any individual can go through life unconditioned by the culture and ideology in which she or he lives.

Similarly, the American endeavor to recover women's history, for example, by emphasizing that women developed their own strategies to gain power within their sphere - was seen by British feminists like Judith Newton and Deborah Rosenfelt as an endeavor that "mystifies" male oppression, disguising it as something that has created for women a special world of opportunities. More important from the British standpoint, the universalizing and "essentializing" tendencies in both American practice and French theory disguise women's oppression by highlighting sexual difference, suggesting that a dominant system is impervious to political change. By contrast, British feminist theory emphasized an engagement with historical process in order to promote social change.

By now the French, American, and British approaches have so thoroughly critiqued, influenced, and assimilated one another that the work of most Western practitioners is no longer easily

identifiable along national boundary lines. Instead, it tends to be characterized according to whether the category of woman is the major focus in the exploration of gender and gender oppression or, alternatively, whether the interest in sexual difference encompasses an interest in other differences that also define identity. The latter paradigm encompasses the work of feminists of color, Third World (preferably called postcolonial) feminists, and lesbian feminists, many of whom have questioned whether the universal category of woman constructed by certain French and North American predecessors is appropriate to describe women in minority groups or non-Western cultures.

These feminists stress that, while all women are female, they are something else as well (such as African-American, lesbian, Muslim Pakistani etc.). This "something else" is precisely what makes them, their problems, and their goals different from those of other women. As Amrit Wilson (1978) has pointed out, Asian women living in Britain are expected by their families and communities to preserve Asian cultural traditions; thus, the expression of personal identity through clothing involves a much more serious infraction of cultural rules than it does for a Western woman.

Women are not a homogeneous group and certainly are not alike as there are differences. Women are differently located within global and local social contexts and differently represented in

art, literature and other media. Distinctions of nationality, ethnicity, education, language, family, class, employment, ability/ disability and sexuality are important. These are not merely differences, which can be acknowledged and passed over. These differences are hierarchical, producing inequalities among women which intersect with gender inequality. Hence, it is important to pay attention to commonalities among women, and crucial differences cannot be ignored.

Nor do women all think alike. ‘Woman’ is not coterminous with ‘feminist’; to be a feminist implies a particular politicized understanding of being a woman. Moreover, while feminists may share some common assumptions, these do not necessarily lead all to think in the same ways about these shared concerns.

It is important to note that while each country has its own tradition of feminist thought; feminist ideas have always

crossed national boundaries. In the past, theory has been dominated by white anglophone feminists from Britain, Australia and especially from the US. More recently, with the questioning of the dominance of white Western feminism, new voices have joined and challenged the terms of feminist debates, making us more sensitive to differences, international issues and the intersections between the global and the local.

Thus, with the rise of feminism across the world, a new generation of Indian feminists has emerged. In India today, contemporary Indian feminists are fighting for: individual autonomy, rights, freedom, independence, tolerance, cooperation, nonviolence and diversity; and against: domestic violence, gender, stereotypes, sexuality, discrimination, sexism, non-objectification, freedom from patriarchy; the right to abortion, reproductive rights, control of the female body, the right to a divorce, equal pay, maternity leave, and education.

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