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The Woman-Other Between Western Feminist Literature and Postcolonial Literature

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Feminist literary criticism offers strategies for analyzing texts to emphasize issues related to gender and sexuality in works written by both men and women, but is particularly concerned with women’s writing. Feminist literary analysis may examine:

- images of women and representations of female experience in texts written by authors of either sex.

- women writers, including the specific qualities and concerns of female authorship and the creation of a female tradition or canon.

- women readers, focusing on the role gender plays in the reception of literary texts and the emergence of a distinct female readership.

- language, attempting to define a distinctly feminine mode of writing and ecriture feminine.

- literary form, particularly the relationship between literary genre and gender.

The ‘new’ French feminists—including Helene Cixous, Iluce irigaray, Julia Kristeva—emphasized that woman is constructed as ‘Other’ through language. In ‘The laugh of the medusa’ (1976) and ‘The rite of the medusa’ (1975), Cixous argued that ‘nearly the entire history of writing is confounded with the history of reason’; it has been one with the phallocentric tradition. In asserting the primacy of language, cixous borrowed from poststructuralist thought, the deconstructive theory of Jacques Derrida, and the psychoanalytic theory of Jaques Lacan. Derrida, offered a critique of western metaphysics, arguing that western thought is grounded in a series of binary oppositions: light/darkness, good/evil, soul/body, life/death, mind/matter, speech/writing, and so on. The terms are not conceived of as equal, but exist in a hierarchical structure (light is privileged over darkness, good over evil, etc.). Fundamentally, Derrida argued, western thought has privileged unity, identity, and immediacy, or presence, over absence (light is presence; darkness is its absence). In ‘Sorties’ (1980; from la jeune née, The Newly Born Woman, 1975), Cixous extended Derrida’s argument by focusing on gender, contending that implicit in each binary opposition is a distinction between man/woman, masculine/feminine. Thus she accounted for woman’s position in western culture as Other. She is defined in opposition to, and in terms of, man. He is present, she is absent. He is associated with being, she is associated with death.

According to Derrida, such meanings are produced in language. The structural linguist Ferdinand de Saussure argued that the process of signification was characterized by difference. Meaning was produced not on the basis of the sign relation to its referent (the
word cat meaning the furry little animal). Instead Saussure argued that the (word) was composed of two parts, the spoken or written word (signifier) and its mental concept (signified). the bond between the signifier and the signified was arbitrary; there is no natural connection, for instance, between the signifier álightô and idea of light itself. Meaning emerges only through the distinction of one signifier from another. We understand the signifier álightô only in opposition to the signifier ádarkô. We understand light as different not only from ádarkô but also from other signifiers (ánightô, ábrightô). Meaning also unfolds in time, along the chain of signification, the sequence of signifiers that unfolds in time as we speak (or read) words.

Derrida complicated this understanding—hence his theory is post-structuralist—by arguing that within the system of language, there are only differences. (A Handbook of Literary Feminism p 165/166) The process of making meaning obviates the possibility of a sign bearing a stable, unified meaning. For instance, we understand the word ácatô in part continued on paper because it is not ádogô or áhatô. In the jazz world ácatô refers not to the furry creature but to a human being, a ácool catô. Signification is not a static process, but a never-ending play of one signifier (that is present in language) against a series of others (that are absent). It is characterized not only by difference, but deferral, for meaning is differed along the chain of signification, which never ends. Derrida’s critique of western thought focused, then, on how we have tended to stop the Play of signification and arbitrarily privilege one meaning over other possible meanings.

In ÑThe Laugh of The MedusaÑ Cixous emphasized that writing has sustained the opposition between male and female. áwomanô has been defined in language, as a signifier, defined in opposition to ámanô Cixous advocated the deconstruction of this opposition: Ñif woman has always functioned Ñwithinô the discourse of man, a signifier that has always referred back to the opposite signifier which annihilates its specific energy and diminishes or stifles its very different sounds, it is time for her to dislocate this Ñwithinô to explode it, and seize it; to make it hers, containing it, taking it in her own mouth, biting that tongue with her very own teeth to invent for herself a language to get inside of.Ñ

Defined in opposition to man, woman has been relegated to a subordinate position within language. Cixous proposed an alternative discursive practice— a new insurgent writing— as a means of unsettling the opposition that devalues the feminine. Writing, in this sense, means Ñworking (in) the inbetween, inspecting the process of the same and of the other without
which nothing can live. Cixous capitalized on Derrida’s assertion that western thought is phallogocentric that its binary logic privileges the masculine, through the transcendentental signifier of the phallus. The term phallus refers not simply to the male organ but to the power accrued to its possessor in language and in culture. (A Handbook of Literary Feminism p 165/166/167)

COLONIALIST LITERATURE is an exploration and a representation of a world at the boundaries of civilization, a world that has not (yet) been domesticated by European signification or codified in detail by its ideology. That world is therefore perceived as uncontrollable, chaotic, unattainable, and ultimately evil. Motivated by his desire to conquer and dominate, the imperialist configures the colonial realm as a confrontation based on differences in race, language, social customs, cultural values, and modes of production. (The postcolonial studies reader p 37)

In many different societies, women, like colonised subjects, have been relegated to the position of Other by various forms of patriarchal domination. They thus share with colonized races and cultures an intimate experience of the politics of oppression and repression. It is not surprising therefore that the history and concerns of feminist theory have paralleled developments in post-colonial theory. Feminist and post-colonial discourses both seek to reinstate the marginalised in the face of the dominant, and early feminist theory, like early nationalist post-colonial criticism, was concerned with inverting the structures of domination, substituting, for instance, a female tradition or traditions for a male-dominated canon. But like postcolonial criticism, feminist theory has rejected such simple inversions in favour of a more general questioning of forms and modes, and the unmasking of the spuriously authoritative on which such canonical constructions are founded. (The postcolonial studies reader p 268)

Feminists argue that the Othering and silencing of women by men is comparable to the representation of the colonized Other that helps uphold white dominance. I will deal with this issue from the notion of double colonisation i.e. That women in formerly colonized societies were doubly colonised by both imperial and patriarchal ideologies (Ashcroft et al., 2003: 269) The notion of double colonisation became a catch-phrase of post-colonial and feminist discourses in the 1980s. But it is only recently that double colonisation has begun to be adequately theorised. (The postcolonial studies reader p 269). Spivak argues that because the construction of an English cultural identity was inseparable from Othering the native as its
object, the articulation of the female subject within the emerging norm of feminist individualism during the age of imperialism, necessarily excluded the native female, who was positioned on the boundary between human and animal as the object of imperialism’s social-mission or soul-making.

Nina pelikan straus, Bette London, Johanna M Smith and Elaine Showelcter were among those who claimed that Joseph Conrad was not only racist but also sexist. Feminists argue that the Othering and silencing of women by men is comparable to the representation of the colonized Other that helps uphold white dominance. Marlow depicts Africans as a voiceless ‘backcloth’ women as ‘out of it’ He feminises Africa itself as a prostrate body that white men enter and plunder. Like Africa and Africans, female characters are depersonalized into symbols, mythical figures or similar abstractions. For instance the intended can be seen as an incarnation of naïve Europe at home that supported the men in the colonies with a belief in their moral purity and their necessary service, while at the same time desiring the money those men were making there. (Colonial Conrad p 35)

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argues that because the construction of an English cultural identity was inseparable from Othering the native as its object, the articulation of the female subject within the emerging norm of feminist individualism during the age of imperialism, necessarily excluded the native female, who was positioned on the boundary between human and animal as the object of imperialism’s social-mission or soul-making. (The postcolonial studies reader p 57/58)

But it may well be important to juxtapose Gayatri Spivak’s other view of this critique, not specifically of the writer, but of the subaltern woman all the same. Spivak explains how the Third World woman cannot be accommodated in the First World discourse because she has been doubly displaced and it would be difficult to place her in a psychoanalytic allegory. (postcolonial African writers p40) Margaret Walker explains these truths further by mentioning that it is hard for the black female writer to deal with racism, with its denial of a creative black mind, because to white people blacks lack intelligence and emotion and creativity. Facing these kinds of repressions, both economic and political, it is a marvel that these subaltern women learn to speak. Gayatri Spivak concludes at the end of her article ‘Can the subaltern speak?’ that the subaltern cannot speak, within the prescribed Western parameters of discourse, because there is no space from which the sexed ‘subaltern’ can speak. (p9) But the subaltern can speak through human agency, despite discursive
determinants. The subaltern sees then through different eyes and critiques the practices around her. She can speak in her own language and has started to speak. She needs to be listened to and not attacked ferociously to be rendered mute again. (postcolonial African writers p46)

Therefore, the obvious and very important area of difference between western feminist literature and postcolonial literature is this: whereas Western feminists discuss the relative importance of feminist versus class emancipation, the African discussion is between feminist emancipation versus the fight against neo-colonialism, particularly in its cultural aspect. In other words, which is the more important, which comes first, the fight for female equality or the fight against Western cultural imperialism? * From ‘First Things First: Problems of a Feminist Approach to African Literature’ Kunapipi 6(3), 1984. KRISTEN HOLST PETERSEN.

The Malawian poet Felix Mnthali explains this problematic in her poem ‘Letter to a Feminist Friend’.

I will not pretend
to see the light
in the rhythm of your paragraphs:
illuminated pages
need not contain
any copy-right
on history
My world has been raped
looted
and squeezed
by Europe and America
and I have been scattered
over three continents
to please Europe and America
AND NOW
the women of Europe and America
after drinking and carousing
on my sweat
rise up to castigate
and castrate
their menfolk
from the cushions of a world
I have built!
Why should they be allowed
to come between us?
You and I were slaves together
uprooted and humiliated together
Rapes and lynchings
the lash of the overseer
and the lust of the slave-owner
do your friends in the movement understand these things?

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No, no, my sister, my love,
first things first!
Too many gangsters
still stalk this continent
too many pirates
too many looters
far too many
still stalk this land
é

When Africa
at home and across the seas
is truly free
there will be time for me
and time for you
to share the cooking
and change the nappies
till then,
first things first!