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Conference on Feminist and Feminine Literature



The Woman-Other Between Western Feminist Literature and Postcolonial Literature

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March 2010

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 *écriture féminine*.

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

The new French feminists – most notably Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva – emphasized that woman is constructed as "Other" through language. In "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1976) and "Le rire de la méduse" (1975), Cixous argued that "nearly the entire history of writing is confounded with the history of reason – it has been one with the **phallogocentric** tradition" (249). In asserting the primacy of language, Cixous borrowed from poststructuralist thought, the deconstructive theory of Jacques Derrida, and the psychoanalytic theory of Jacques 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's** 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 /light/ and idea of light itself. Meaning emerges only through the distinction of one signifier from another. We understand the signifier /light/ only in opposition to the signifier /dark/. We understand light as different not only from /dark/ but also from other signifiers (/night/ /bright/ /tight/). 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 /cat/ in part continued on paper because it is not /dog/ or /hat/. In the jazz world /cat/ refers not to the furry creature but to a human being, a "cool cat". 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 deferred 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 "The Laugh of The Medusa", Cixous emphasized that writing has sustained the opposition between male and female. /woman/ has been defined in language, as a signifier, defined in opposition to /man/. Cixous advocated the deconstruction of this opposition: "if woman has always functioned within 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 /within/ 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."

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 "working (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 transcendental 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, colonized 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 Baym, Bette London, Johanna M. Smith and Elaine Showalter 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 a part 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. (59) But the subaltern can speak through human agency, despite discursive

do your friends -in the movementø
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 landô

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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 nappiesô
till then,
first things first!