Poststructuralist Feminist Discourse: An Over-view

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Abstract

This paper is based on an over-view of poststructuralist feminist discourse literature. The researcher has reviewed the works on feminist discourse and tried to deconstruct the idea of single identity of a woman. The basic objective of this research is to show that women writers definitely need an alternative discourse of their own, as has been suggested by Virginia Woolf (1966), to move away from the linear patriarchal structure, which in itself is gender- biased. The researcher shows that in women identities are constructed through various social roles assigned to them by the society and for the assignment of these roles discourse play a very important role as has been maintained by James Gee(1996) in his concept of discourse. The researcher has combined the theories of eminent feminists with the discourse models. The present study draws on theory and research from post structuralism, feminism and deconstruction and applies these postmodern strands to show that woman's identity is not monolithic.

Poststructuralist Feminism:

Feminist discourse takes as its major premise the view that gender difference dwells in language rather than in the referent. It means that there is nothing "natural" about gender in itself. In placing emphasis on language the feminists do not suggest a sort of linguistic or poetic retreat into a world made only of words. Rather, language intervenes so that "materiality" is not taken to be a self-evident category. Thus, language itself is understood as radically marked by the materiality of gender. The poststructuralists focus on language. Thus, they raise fundamental questions that extend beyond matters of usage. The understanding of writing and the body as sites where the material and the linguistic intersect requires the interrogation of woman as a category of gender or sex.

The need for an alternative discourse arose for the female writers as in the patriarchal discourse their identities were constructed through the mirror of inherent biases found in the patriarchal discourse. Alcoff*[i](1996) finds the work of post-

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structuralist "illuminating and persuasive", especially in their theorizing "the construction of subjectivity".

These post-structuralist feminists teach us a lot about "the mechanisms of sexist oppression and the construction of specific gender categories by relating these to social discourse and by conceiving of the subject as a cultural product". There is at least the semblance of a good deal of freedom for them women in their notions and theories. The "free play" of a plurality of differences is unhampered by any predetermined gender identity as formulated by either patriarchy or cultural feminism. Alcoff recognizes that post-structuralist feminism has taught us about the need to theorize the category "woman" through an exploration of the experience of subjectivity, as opposed to the mere description of current attributes (characteristic of cultural feminism), and believes the feminist appropriation of post-structuralism has provided suggestive insights on the construction of female and male subjectivity and has issued a crucial warning against creating a feminism (like cultural feminism) that reinvades the mechanisms of oppressive power.

Challenging patriarchal discourse:

Questioning the political and ethical grounds of language, the poststructuralist feminists considered here share a common opponent in patriarchal discourse, a feature that emerges in their readings of literature, philosophy, history, and psychoanalysis. This is not to suggest that they all counter or even define patriarchal discourse in the same way. As Hélène Cixous*[ii] (1968) suggests:

> *It has become rather urgent to question this solidarity between logocentrism and phallocentrism—bringing to light the fate dealt to woman, how one might go about such questioning is a point of dispute* (*Newly* 65).

According to Luce Irigaray (1960):

> *We cannot simply step outside of phallogocentrism so as suddenly to write and think in ways completely free of the rules of patriarchy, for language and discourse are themselves inscribed with those rules. Instead, we have to work like a virus from within patriarchal discourses to infect and radically change them, thus leaving open the possibility of a different language* (*This Sex* 80).

The linear patriarchal structure of language was radically affecting the identities of the women and the subsequent roles assigned to them by the society.
With the inception of this discourse many misconceptions about women and their

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ii Hélène Cixous (b. 1937), whose formidable production includes 23 volumes of poems, 6 of essays, 5 historical plays, and a number of articles, is best known for "The Laugh of the Medusa" and The Newly Born Woman.

identities were removed. They no longer were mere puppets swayed forward at the whims and discretions of their male masters, as has been portrayed by the male writers. On the other hand, their own identity as individuals was established.

Sex and Gender:

The poststructuralist feminists' attention to language and materiality, which has given rise to a renewed concern for the maternal instinct, has also provoked an extended debate over the meanings of "gender" and "sexual difference." It can be explained as a rejection of the biological determinism implicit in the use of such terms as sex and sexual difference. Sexual difference constrains feminist critical thought of sex opposition, which makes it difficult, if not impossible, to articulate differences among women. Behaviour serves to promote inequality, urged the above mentioned feminist writers. Wittig (1960) takes this reservation even further and calls for the destruction of gender and sex altogether. She understands gender to be "the linguistic index of the political opposition between the sexes and of the domination of women," while sex is a political and philosophical category "that founds society as heterosexual" (*Mark* 64*, Category* 66*)*. That is to say, within language women are marked by gender, and within society they are marked by sex. As a way of eliminating this patriarchal dichotomy of heterosexual exchange, Wittig appeals to a "lesbianization" of language.

Cixous (1968) takes a still different approach. Rather than focusing on the distinction between "gender" and "sexual difference" per se, she says that:

> *Sexual difference becomes most clearly perceived at the level of jouissance, inasmuch as a woman's instinctual economy cannot be identified by a man or referred to the masculine economy* (*Choreographies* 82).

And in turn, according to Cixous, the best way to engage with these different dichotomies is through recourse to a theory of bisexuality. By privileging bisexuality, Cixous could be doing nothing more than returning us to the binary oppositions of phallogocentric sexual difference, of male and female.

Despite such objections, Cixous insists that bisexuality is a notion meant to call attention to the multiplicity of possible sites for desire and pleasure (*Newly, Laugh*). That is to say, bisexuality *doesn't annul differences but stirs them up,* That is certainly what *[iii]Julia Kristeva(1969) maintains when she argues that bisexuality, no matter what qualifications accompany the term, always entails privileges: *The totality of one of the sexes and thus [effaces] difference* (*Kristeva, Reader* 209). *pursues them, increases their number (Laugh 254*). In this respect, Cixous's position lines up with Jacques *[iv]Derrida's (1930) belief in the possibility of "the multiplicity of sexually marked voices"(*On Deconstruction* 76).

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iii Kristeva is concerned to bring the speaking body back into Phenomenology and linguistics

iv According to Derrida the meanings that should be understood of the written material should not be what have actually been written but also what the but also what the writer in general intended to write.

Thus, sex is retrospectively produced through our understanding of gender, so that in a sense gender comes before sex. It can be argued that in light of this counterintuitive situation, we should deconstruct the gender fables that establish and circulate the misnomer of natural facts and recognize that it becomes impossible to separate out gender from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained. Gender thus proves to be performative. That is to say, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed.

The Identity of Women:

In the wake of this dispersal of gender positions, poststructuralist feminists have formulated significantly different answers to the question, What is woman? Kristeva contends that the question simply cannot be answered; there is no such thing as "woman" (*New French,*1989 ed. Marks and de Courtivron, 137). For Kristeva, the subject is always in process, a series of identities held accountable only to an arbitrary imposition of the law of the father; and as a way to keep open as many subject positions as possible. She favours "a concept of femininity which would take as many forms as there are women" (Moi, *French* 114).

Judith Butler (1990) takes this argument a step further when she reminds us that even the plural form "women" is always incomplete. "Women", to her, exist in relation to a matrix of differences such as "it would be wrong to assume in advance that there is a category of 'women' that simply needs to be filled in with various components of race, class, age, ethnicity, and sexuality in order to become complete". (*Gender Trouble*:1980)

By contrast, Wittig (1960) sees nothing positive in either "woman" or women. For her, woman is the equivalent of slave and only has meaning in heterosexual systems of thought and economics, in which women are defined in terms of their reproductive function (*The Lesbian Body* 70).

Irigaray (1960) takes a similarly skeptical view, arguing that "woman" is man's creation, a masquerade of femininity: "In our social order, women are 'products' used and exchanged by men. Their status is that of merchandise, 'commodities'" (*This Sex* 84). For Irigaray, woman has always been merely the means by which male sexual identity is confirmed, really a non-sex represented in an economy of "hom(m)osexualité," of men *(homme)* and identity or sameness (homo). Thus, Irigaray goes so far as to conclude that the question itself is really the wrong one:

> *They should not put it, then, in the form "What is woman?" but rather, repeating/ interpreting the way in which, within discourse, the feminine finds itself defined as lack, deficiency, or as imitation and negative image of the subject, they should signify that with respect to this logic a disruptive excess is possible on the feminine side*. (The *Sex*, 78)

Instead of creating a theory of woman, Irigaray wants to secure a place for the

feminine within sexual difference. It is a place where the feminine cannot signify itself in any proper meaning, proper name, or concept, not even that of woman. Thus, her refusal to answer the question, what is woman? can be understood as a refusal to reproduce the phallogocentric system, which keeps in place the same oppressive language and systems of representation.

Feminist Discourse:

The end of the Medieval period and the beginning of the Renaissance in several European countries including Spain is marked with astonishing growth of texts dealing with woman's nature. These texts contributed to the formation of feminist discourse in the Modern period. However, in order to understand the process of the formation of feminist discourse, one must understand its articulation from its inception and the context in which it is born.

Feminist theory has drawn heavily on Foucault's discourse theory work (1972). But it seems to be paradoxical to use Foucault's work within feminist theory. Foucault's work is not easily translatable into feminist concerns. His work on sexuality only touches marginally on the question of female hysteria, and he is certainly not a theorist who addresses gender issues as they relate to women. Moreover, it may also seem paradoxical that his work has been so widely used in feminist theory. However, discourse theory has been particularly productive because of its concern with theorizing power.

Feminist theorists mainly concentrate on the power relations and how a woman group negotiates relations of power. Recent feminist work has moved away from viewing women as simply an oppressed group, as victims of male domination, and has tried to formulate ways of analyzing power as it manifests itself and as it is resisted in the relations of everyday life. Discourse is very important because it allows the conceptualization of power relationship.

Foucault's analysis of power has been very influential with feminist theorists. His evaluation of power enabled the feminists to develop a model of power relations which is fairly complex. This model deals with other variables such as race and class without having to prioritize one of them over the others. Whereas hard-line Marxist theorists would still consider class to be the most important factor in the oppression of certain groups, and would consider gender to be simply a form of secondary exploitation, a Foucauldian analysis would see class concerns integrated with concerns about gender. People are not oppressed because of their class separately from their oppression because of race or gender, although one of those factors might be dominant at any particular moment. In her discussion of the impossibility of separating gender, race and class when describing relations of power under imperialism, Anne McClintock puts it in the following way:

> *Imperialism cannot be understood without a theory of gender power. Gender power was not the superficial patina of empire, an ephemeral gloss over the more decisive mechanisms of class and race. Rather, gender dynamics were,*

from the outset, fundamental to the securing and maintenance of the imperial enterprise.(McClintock, 1995: 6-7)

Although Foucault's model of power is not concerned with the feminist discourse directly, but still there are many facts, which the feminist writers have taken from this model. These facts significantly modified our notion of what discourse is.

Woolf's Feminist discourse:

Woolf's contribution in devising feminist discourse is simply remarkable. She was the first woman writer to move away from the patriarchal linear system of language and invent the technique of the stream of consciousness for most of the women writers in particular and for all the writers in general.

Woolf addresses her thoughts on "the question of women and fiction,". In *[v] *A Room of One's Own*, (1929) Woolf ponders the significant question of whether or not a woman could produce art of the high quality of Shakespeare. In doing so, she examines women's historical experience as well as the distinctive struggle of the woman artist.

Though published seventy years ago, Virginia Woolf's Room *of One's Own* is as appealing as it originally was. Modern women writers look to Woolf as a prophet of inspiration. In November 1929, Woolf wrote to her friend G. Lowes Dickinson that she penned the book because she "wanted to encourage the young women–they seem to get frightfully depressed" (xiv). The irony here, of course, is that Woolf herself eventually grew so depressed and discouraged that she killed herself. The suicide seems symptomatic of Woolf's own feelings of oppression within a patriarchal world where only the words of men, it seemed, were taken seriously. Nevertheless, women writers still look to Woolf as a liberating force, especially, at *A Room of One's Own* which is an inspiring and empowering work. Woolf's biographer *[vi] Quentin Bell notes that the text argues:

The disabilities of women are social and economic; the woman writer can only survive despite great difficulties, and despite the prejudice and the economic selfishness of men; and the key to emancipation is to be found in the door of a room which a woman may call her own and which she can inhabit with the same freedom and independence as her brothers. (144)

Woolf's first assertion is that women are spatially hindered in creative life. *A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction* Woolf writes, *and that as you will see, leaves the great problem of the true nature of women and fiction unresolved* (4*).* What Woolf seems to say is that being female stifles creativity. Woolf does not assume, however, that a biological reason for this stifling exists. Instead, she implies that a woman's life *conflicts with something that is not life* (71)*.* In other words, mothering, being a wife and catering of daily needs, culturally defined

v The extended essay was published in 1929 and soon became a feminist classic.

vi He penned and published Woolf's biography under the title of " Woman of Substance"

expectations of women infringe upon creativity, in particular the writing of fiction. The smothering realities of a woman's life i.e. housekeeping and child-rearing duties, distract a woman from writing. Sadly, Woolf notes, even if a woman in such circumstances manages to write anyway, she will write in a rage where she should write calmly. *She will write foolishly where she should write wisely. She will write of herself where she should write of her characters* (69-70*)*. Woolf opines here that an angry woman, writing out of the repression of her everyday life, will be an ineffective writer. Finally, Woolf blames the patriarchal culture, as if the *freedom of women writing is some infringement of [man's] power to believe in himself* (35). She suggests that men resist women writers because fiction by women somehow diminishes their belief in their own works. Wolf's message, it seems, is that women must rail against the resistance of the patriarchal culture and attain some degree of independence and androgyny.

Woolf does not suggest that women write the same as men do. In fact, Woolf asserts that it would be a *thousand pities if women wrote like men, or lived like men, or looked like men* (88). Woolf believes that a man's sentence is not a woman's sentence, that the two will be vastly different from each other, though not necessarily one better than the other. Her assertion is that men's sentences are awkward in the hands of women because *the nerves that feed the brain would seem to differ in men and women* (78). This difference of gray matter and neurons would necessarily result in a difference of perspective and sentence structure. Woolf suggests that for fiction to be artfully done there must exist a measure of androgyny, *a plan of the soul so that in each of us two powers preside, one male, one female* (98). In essence, Woolf claims that this state of androgyny would allow women the same freedom to express themselves that men seem to have been inherently endowed with. *The androgynous mind is resonant and porous, Woolf continues, it transmits emotion without impediment; it is naturally creative, incandescent and undivided* (98). What Woolf overtly states here is that the ideal creative mind is a marriage, or balance, of the supposed female traits of emotionalism with the supposed male traits of productivity and style. What is implicit, however, is that the female mind can be resonant and porous only when undivided. In other words, a woman can write well only when her mind, like a man's, is not forced to choose between gender and identity, or between her art and society's expectations of her. A woman will write with fluidity and resonance only when she has the same freedom of expression as a man.

An additional notion Woolf presents is that women must maintain individuality in their experiences as writers. This intimacy with one's identity nurtures the creation of fiction, but only when written out of one's own personality and not imitated through another's. *Why are Jane Austen's sentences not the right shape for you?* Asks woolf! The idea Woolf reinforces here is that a woman should find and develop her own writing style, not simply mimic her predecessors. Notice, though, that Woolf does not suggest we glean no stylistic inspiration from women writers like the Brontes and Jane Austen, who paved the way for generations of women writers. *Books continue each other*, Woolf says*, in spite of our habit of judging them separately*. Continuing

something, however, does not mean using the same blueprints or tools during the creative process. What Woolf implies is that every book a woman, sitting in that room of her own, produces will generate books from other women. A degree of mimicry, of course, is impossible to avoid. *A woman writing*, Woolf admits*, thinks back through her mother's* (97). The "mothers" here are not only biological mothers who give birth to our physical bodies, but also those women who meticulously scratched their way out of patriarchal constraints and into print; the women who acted as surrogates to birth generations of women writers. Subtle mimicry would seem a natural act under such circumstances, much as a child unconsciously develops personality traits of either parent.

Finally, a woman reading Woolf's book has to wonder if that "room of one's own" is strictly a spatial and physical concept or is it a vision of independence, a place one can emotionally go to and write from. Few of us have the luxury of a concrete room of our own, and if we are to be writers, emotional space of our own is the barest necessity. Women who want to write must find some quiet space in their psyches from which they can create. *So long as you write what you want to write, that is all that matters* Woolf encourages, *and whether it matters for ages or only for hours, nobody can say* (106). What Woolf seems to say is that what we create within that space of ourselves, within a single moment, is what matters so long as we do it with a clear vision of our own individual, androgynous hearts.

Woolf defines the question of women and fiction as being three inextricable questions: women and what they are like; women and the fiction they write; and women and what is written about them.

Feminine Writing:

Helene Cixous (1968) is at odds with biologically based readings of Sigmund Freud (1856——1939).She thus, surmised that the notion of femininity and feminine writing was based not only upon a "given" essence of male and female characteristics but on cultural taboos .She perceived feminist writings were the direct result of repressive patterning within the framework of a society. This theorizing, pursued in the politicized French atmosphere during deconstruction and cultural revolution, prompted questions about how "writing" deploys power, how to read a feminine (no patriarchal) text, and, with even greater urgency, what the "feminine" is.

In *choreographies* (1968) perhaps her most strongly Derridean text, Cixous challenges the boundaries between theory and fiction. She also projects *écriture féminine* as not necessarily writing by a woman but writing also practiced by male authors such as Jean Genet and James Joyce. *Laugh of the Medusa* and *Castration or Decapitation?* presents Cixous's case for the reading of feminine writing against psychoanalysis. In *Laugh* she describes how writing is structured by a "sexual opposition" favoring men, one that "has always worked for man's profit to the point of reducing writing . . . to his laws" (883). Writing is constituted in a "discourse" of relations social, political, and linguistic in makeup. These relations are characterized in a masculine or feminine

"economy." In this model, patterns of linearity and exclusion (patriarchal "logic") require a strict hierarchical organization of (sexual) difference in discourse and give a "grossly exaggerated" view of the "sexual opposition" actually inherent to language (879).

When the "repressed" of their culture and their society returns, it's an explosive, utterly destructive, staggering return, with a force never yet unleashed and equal to the most forbidding of suppressions. For when the phallic period comes to an end, women will have been either annihilated or borne up to the highest and most violent incandescence. (*Laugh* 886)

Cixous is aware of the difficulties of envisioning a writing practice that cannot be theorized and whose existence is scanty.

Cixous claims woman's privileged relationship with the voice as a result of her being never far from "mother .There is always within her at least a little of that good mother's milk. She writes in white ink" *(Laugh* 881). But she refuses to conceive of the effects of the past as irremovable, and when she speaks of women's writing—or, as she later said in *Illa,* of women's search for a *langue maternelle*—she speaks in the future tense: she sets out, not to say what it is, but to speak *about what it will do* (875). The exclusion of women from writing (and speaking) is linked to the fact that the Western history of writing is synonymous with the history of reasoning and with the separation of the body from the text. The body entering the text disrupts the masculine economy of superimposed linearity and tyranny: the feminine is the "overflow" of "luminous torrents" (*Laugh* 876), a margin of "excess" eroticism and free-play not directly attributable to the fixed hierarchies of masculinity.

The "openness" of such writing is evident in Cixous's own style both in fictional texts such as *Souffles* (1975) and *Angst* (1977) and in Laugh, as when she writes that "we the precocious, we the repressed of culture, our lovely mouths gagged with pollen, our wind knocked out of us, we the labyrinths, the ladders, the trampled spaces, the bevies—we are black and we are beautiful" (*Laugh* 878). In such language Cixous forces exposition into poetic association and controls the "excess" of imagery through repetition and nonlinear accretions. Virginia Woolf (1929) contrasts such writing to "male," "shadowed," or violently imposed writing.. For Cixous, Woolf, and Kristeva, there is the key assumption that the feminine economy of excess does not need re-creation, to be made anew, because it persists in the margins and gaps (as the repressed, the unconscious) of male-dominated culture. As a characteristically deconstructive reader, she understands texts as built upon a system of cultural contradictions, especially concerning values. In her reading she strives to focus on those contradictions and then to find the channels of "excess" and violation, accidents of meaning and perversities of signification, through which texts inscribe a feminine writing that goes beyond and escapes the masculine economy of texts.

Cixous's post-Lacanian discourse, however, has also been indicted for supporting patriarchal and psychoanalytic norms. Ann Rosalind Jones and others have charged that underlying Cixous's feminine economy, her sophistication in articulating it

notwithstanding, is the assumption of an "essential" femininity in texts, the identifiable quality that allows feminine discourse to be named as such in relation to Oedipus, the essential quality of "openness" that allows a text to resist external control and the superimposition of closed Oedipal patterns.*Medusa* has been classified, petrified, sentenced, guilty of biologism, guilty of essentialism, of utopianism. "But she does not laugh, she is not listening, she just is not there" (2). The case against *écriture féminine* results from a desire "to locate *l'écriture féminine* within a definite category, a desire to co-opt into a literary theory that which always exceeds it" (195). This thing places Cixous's discourse in relation to the Eastern doctrine of nonduality: "Cixous' proposed depersonalization, like that of the ancient east, desires to put something back into an incomplete and mechanical life, a life lived without passion or intensity" (198-99).

Conclusion:

From the above mentioned works it is clear that the style and way of feminine writing is completely different from that of the masculine. The gender differences, which are deeply rooted within the linear patriarchal language is the basic cause for these linguistic differences between male and female writings. The need for alternative discourse for women arose when the female writers realized that gender biases were inherent in the patriarchal language. This made the new genre of feminist discourse coming into existence.

The researcher, after evaluating the works of the feminist writers, has reached the conclusion that they have tried to celebrate their womanhood by establishing their identity as individuals. They are against the binary juxtaposition created by their male counterparts. This need of theirs to find their identity as individuals and not merely as "women" has found expression in a rather new kind of discourse, which is called feminist discourse. This is very much different from the linear patriarchal language structure. In this world women are not merely daughters, sisters, grand daughters, mothers and wives but also writers, travellers, clerks, stenographers, doctors, teachers and above all protestors and rebels. The propounders of feminist discourse revolted against the idea of single identity of women and thus the concept of "fluid identity" came into existence.

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