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HÉLÈNE CIXOUS' ÉCRITURE FÉMININE : THEORY OF THE FEMININE BODY

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ABSTRACT

Patriarchy defines woman as incomplete, dark, passive, irrational and reduces her as the 'Other'. Woman internalizes the patriarchal definitions of femininity. Patriarchy conditions woman to be frightened and disgusted of her own sexuality and surrender her body and her individuality to the masculine order. The female body becomes a space colonized by man and patriarchal values. The domain of writing has also been colonized by male writers where woman has no space rather than to abide by the traditional practice of writing. Hélène Cixous, a French feminist, seeks to subvert the patriarchal order by establishing a connection between the female body and writing. Through her 'Écriture Féminine', she urges women to deconstruct the patriarchal laws to recuperate their bodies and affirm their identity.

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Hélène Cixous is a writer, literary critic, professor of literature and a French feminist. She is proudly known as the mother of post-structuralist feminist theory, besides French feminists, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva. Cixous' series of theoretical writings – *The Laugh of the Medusa* (*Le Rire de la Méduse*), *The Newly Born Woman* (*La jeune née*), *Castration or Decapitation* (*Le sexe ou la tête*) and *Coming to Writing* (*La venue à l'écriture*) explore the relationship between feminine sexuality and writing. *Le Rire de la Méduse* which first appeared in the French journal *Arc* is dedicated to Simone de Beauvoir. It was later translated as *The Laugh of the Medusa* by Keith and Paula Cohen and published in the American feminist journal *Signs*. It became quite popular and reached an even wider audience when it was included in Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivon's anthology *New French Feminisms*. Cixous' indomitable commitment to the struggle for women's liberation and her strong

critique of patriarchal modes of thought make her a feminist.

Hélène Cixous was born in Algeria in 1937 to a mother of Austro-German origins and a father of colonial French and Jewish origins. This background with mixed cultural heritage condemned and banned her to a state of exclusion and exile, driving her desperately in search of her home and identity. Her bitter personal experience of oppositions between master/ slave set the grounds to champion the cause of women's liberation from gendered binary oppositions which relegates the feminine to the role of the *other* or the negative in hierarchies which society constructs. Cixous' theory of *Écriture Féminine* is a feminine form of writing that deconstructs the constraints of phallogocentric thought to liberate womanhood through a rediscovery of the feminine body towards the path of intellectual goal and freedom in society. Cixous asserts that social structures cannot be dissociated from linguistic structures. Language, a tool for

communication is inextricably linked to history and society. Besides, Cixous believes that language itself is an agent of women's oppression because writing has always been done in the name of the father and to counteract this repression, she invites women to *Écriture Féminine*.

Cixous' theory which projects new strategies to associate feminine body and feminine writing, challenges Sigmund Freud's distorting and ridiculous notions of femininity. Cixous condemns Freud who defines women as 'lack', 'incomplete' and 'dark continent'. His discrimination of feminine sexuality is purely based on biology. Sexual difference is determined by the presence or absence of a penis, a precarious prejudice by which women become castrated, envying the ideal penis, a process by which they are culturally doomed to be inferior to men. Freud drapes feminine sexuality as dark and as mysterious as the dark continent, Africa which highlights the culture of oppression. Cixous complains that women have internalised the fear of the dark and that patriarchy has conditioned women to be frightened and disgusted of their own sexuality. This repression of feminine sexuality, for Cixous, extends to the realm of writing which has been traditionally masculine.

Cixous propounds her theory drawing inspiration from the philosophy of Jacques Derrida, a post-structuralist and borrowing certain concepts from Jacques Lacan's theory of gender development. Lacan draws heavily on the fundamental concepts of Freud and reviews them through language, the version of linguistics developed by Ferdinand de Saussure and Roman Jakobson. Lacan brings to light that words are not the things they represent, but merely substitutes for them and that a signifier is always defined in relation to the other signifier in an endless chain of signifiers. With reference to gender development, Lacan affirms that woman is always defined with reference to man because he is the Subject and she is the Other. Lacan retraces and alters Freud's model of the Oedipal complex but insists on its basis in language. He argues that the newborn child has no sense of differentiation between himself and the universe around him. He is the centre of his own universe and enjoys the dyadic unity with the

nourishing mother. This is Freud's pre-oedipal stage which Lacan interprets as the pre-linguistic or the Imaginary realm. To gain entry into the culture of the universe, the child splits away from its mother, the primitive source of pleasure and comfort. The child learns that the father is the source of power in the family and in the world. Freud's child identifies with the father when he discovers that the female body has no penis. Fearing the punishment of a similar castration he glorifies his father and his sign of masculinity and represses his desire for the mother. For Lacan, this repression is succeeded by the entry of the child into the Symbolic order with its social and linguistic rules and prohibitions centered on the name of the father, the ultimate authority and possessor of the phallus.

Cixous designs her theory to subvert this symbolic order drawing source from Jacques Derrida's concept of '*différance*' which aims to deconstruct the Western philosophical traditions. For Derrida, Western metaphysics is logocentric where the presence of reason, truth and meaning depends upon a series of exclusions. Logocentrism privileges speech over writing and is structured around hierarchical binary oppositions, where each term achieves its significance through its structural relationship to the other term hailing presence over absence. Logocentrism is thus a system which assumes that presence is the foundation of truth and identity while absence represents corruption and lack. Derrida coins the term *phallogocentrism* merging the terms *phallocentrism* and *logocentrism* where binary divisions thrive. Derrida's theory of Deconstruction seeks to disrupt the dual hypocrisies which glorify speech/writing, presence/absence, good/bad, masculine/feminine, activity/passivity. For Derrida, identity and meaning (signification) are not fixed and produced in the static closure of the binary opposition drawing attention to the fact that meaning and identity are continually in the process of becoming. The derridean term '*différance*' with its letter 'a' from the original '*différence*' with the letter 'e' is a deliberate attempt to subvert the Western privilege attributed to speech. Both the words read the same; the difference of the misspelt letter being inaudible which proves the mandatory requisite of writing. Therefore, writing becomes a

threat to the tradition of presence over absence entrenched in Western metaphysics and breaks the prison of patriarchal language.

Post-structural feminism challenges the Western system governed by the phallogocentric economy which privileges hierarchical sexual dichotomies of mind and masculinity over body and femininity and excludes and colonizes feminine sexuality as *Other*. *Écriture Féminine* aims to represent and articulate a feminine libidinal economy to undo the repression of the body, the feminine sexuality and writing in the phallogocentric society. Cixous lauds that it should be gratifying for women to write as feminine writing gives her bodily pleasure through identification breaking the hegemonic authority, the *Empire of the Proper*. Cixous' writing attempts to shatter and displace the cultural binary stereotypes masculine/feminine, active/passive, culture/nature through her *Écriture Féminine* and bring about the inscription of the feminine in text and society. She affirms "Write yourself; your body must be heard. Then will spring forth the immense resources of your unconscious". She raises the consciousness of women to break away the chains of heterosexuality and write about their femininity, their eroticism, their pleasures and their sexuality.

Écriture Féminine is a resistance to the traditional mode of writing that is logical, ordered and prosaic. Feminine writing disrupts the rigid pattern with an overflowing, excessive and poetic practice of writing. But Cixous denies the possibility of defining the feminist practice of writing that is revolutionary and volcanic. Her erotic, fluid and poetic language with extravagant creation is a powerhouse of metaphors, allusions, puns, poetic images, ellipses, neologisms trampling linearly logical formations, syntactic and semantic constructions prevalent in the masculine mode of writing. Cixous observes that Poetry is also an art that questions the patriarchal ideologies and transforms them. The core idea of Cixous' theory is presented in this phrase "Let the priests tremble, we're going to show them our 'sexts'!", Cixous' neologism which sets a fruitful terrain for establishing the relationship between sex and text (ie) feminine sexuality and writing. Unlike masculine

sexuality that is focused on the phallus which is singular and static, feminine sexuality is multiple and plural reverberating with immense sexual impulses of the body. She throws light on the autoeroticism of the female body which loses its self and identity in the heterosexual system. She pleads womanhood to look for their lost bodies, to rediscover them, to love them, to explore them and to let them vibrate with their personal erotic pleasures. She observes that women must explore, discover and expose their potential and energy in the feminine body and writing. Cixous' writing, like feminine sexuality exceeds boundaries and overflows to break the phallogocentric barriers imposed on women sexually, linguistically and socially. The very act of writing invites the participation of the body which is the principal symbol of the self. By writing and expressing the feminine body, feminine sexuality and feminine jouissance, women shall liberate their body from the passive heterosexual system, where they have been violently chased and colonized. Once woman reclaims her body, she can affirm her identity in the intellectual arena through feminine writing.

Cixous states that by exploring their erogenous zones and bringing them to writing, women should be proud of deconstructing hierarchical values that determine the androcentric world and take the flight towards intellectual flourish. Recollecting Freud's notion of femininity as 'lack', Cixous counterstates with irony that woman truly lacks something; it is the lack of fear to explore and write. *Écriture Féminine* challenges the *Empire of the Proper* and opens up new horizons for the *Empire of the Gift*. This is the feminine libidinal economy which is characterized by generosity that flows from the female body to give without any expectation in return. Since Cixous' target is to subvert the male and female dichotomy, she apparently proposes 'the other bisexuality', a deconstructive force which goes beyond and exceeds the categories of masculinity and femininity and introduces a third sex that is free from the constraints of binary oppositions. Cixous believes that writing, by dissolving the binary oppositions, becomes bisexual. However Cixous claims that this bisexual writing enables sexuality to be represented

by both men and women. She provides examples of the German poet Heinrich Kleist and the French writer Jean Genet who employed the feminine libidinal economy in their writing.

Cixous introduces the Medusa as a metaphor for woman's multiplicity that resists the singular phallus which subjugates woman's body and voice. Cixous explores the Greek myth of the Medusa and reinterprets Freud's castrated Medusa. Medusa a golden-haired and fair maiden, as a priestess of Athena, is devoted to a life of celibacy. However, after being wooed by Poseidon and falling for him, she forgets her vows and marries him. She is brutally cursed by the goddess Minerva who transforms her into a monster with every golden lock of hair becoming a venomous snake. She turns into stone anybody she gazed upon and is ultimately delivered by Perseus who beheads her. For Freud, the Medusa who is a repulsive creature is a symbol of female castration. Cixous reads the myth of the Medusa as a triumph of the masculine order to subjugate the female body and her expression. Cixous attempts to portray the Medusa as smiling and beautiful with multiple serpents highlighting the multiple feminine erogenous zones which displace with a rebellious urge to deconstruct the lacanian theory of symbolic order in the development of language. Laughing at the constraints placed on her, the Medusa expresses joy to redirect the language of oppression into the language of the body that is boundaryless.

Écriture Féminine brings the feminine body closer to the maternal body. The voice in each woman springs from the body which pulsates through maternal love which lingers in her. It is the Voice of the Mother, the omnipotent figure that dominates the fantasies of the pre-Oedipal child before entry into the symbolic order. The mother symbolizes *The Empire of the Gift*, the generous dispenser of love, nourishment and plenitude. This maternal space filled with milk and honey becomes the source of feminine writing in white ink. Cixous brings to light the creative mother within every woman which shall take its intellectual flight when the female body gets liberated from the phallogocentric system.

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