

Iron Cage of Languge: A Feminist Dilemma

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ABSTRACT: *The feminist anguish rose as a reaction against the traditional definitions of woman that encapsulated women into certain roles such as mother, wife, sister, and daughter, may it be defined by religious interpretations, myths and stories or any philosophical speculation. Any of such social construct was rejected by the feminist movement as a conforming agency towards a more patriarchal hegemony. A radical revolt against the preexisting conceptions of women came in the form of new imagery of women in a pornographic form which was celebrated by the movement as an icebreaker to the patriarchal social construct. The symbolic interactionist perspective defines the construction of any social reality – in this case, a patriarchal society shaping the definitions of woman – with respect to some symbols and the meanings associated to them in the social interaction. Language is the most important of these symbols used in the interaction which consequently shapes any social construct. To transcend this agency of social construction, Feminists such as Cixous invented *Ecriture Feminine*, a new feminine language. However, there are some paradoxes and concerns threatening this innovation such as regression towards pre-symbolic phase, reinforcement of inequality and most of all, the existential impediment which ergo brings back this problem into a social construction of reality if analyzed by a symbolic interactionist.*

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One wonders if women still exist, If they will always exist, Whether or not it is desirable that they should, What place they occupy in this world, What their place should be (McCann, Kim, & Kim, 2003, p. 32).

Introduction:

Simon de Beauvoir posited these essential questions and tried to create an awareness of the situation in which women come to accept and comply with the values given by socio-historical and religious structures. Simone de Beauvoir has conducted a pioneering study on such oppressive structures and reveals the power structures involves in the subjugation of women. These questions have never been taken up in discourse like this before. The discourse on women and their subsequent rights is known as feminism. Feminism has shaped the concept of women aguishly, agonizingly and rigorously in a reactionary manner. They reacted against the traditional definition of women as mother, wife, sister, and daughter (Degler, 1992, p. 106): correspondingly against the frameworks of nurturance, reproduction, sensitivity and privacy. Thus, any definition of women, if there was any, was fiercely contested. They defined women contrary to all definitions proposed by religion and its stories of man's creations, against mythical interpretations and philosophical insights as well.

Feminist critics centralized their debates on conscious structures manifesting in religious scriptures, myths, stories, etc. (Moi, 1986, p. 89). These conscious structures are the dominant narratives in any society. They responded critically to an understanding of women as a servant to male interests (Fuchs, 2003, p. 210). They revolted against New Testaments' subjection of women under man's authority (Ruether, 1981, p. 388). They claim that such understanding is patriarchic in nature. All religions have been constructed with the masculine spectacle. Therefore, any claim of an independent identity for women in religion is fundamentally impossible. There will never be any voice in religion that is female. In religious forms, she will always be subordinated. Feminists challenged the depiction of Eve as created from the supernumerary bone of Adam (Reik, 1960, p. 45) or the sinner who was deceived (Toews, 2013, p. 45). They instead proposed the creation of Eve in perfection after the rough draft of Adam (Hendel, 2010, p. 72).

For similar reasons, the symbolism of mythical stories and fairy tales caused disenchantment for feminist thinkers. Their dissatisfaction with these rich literary sources is due to their treatment of female imagery. Medusa was appeared with a horrible face with writhing snakes instead of

hair, turning into stone, whoever looks directly at her (Miller, 1958, p. 389). Some conceive the imagery of Pandora in the Promethean myth as evil (Glenn, 1977, p. 179). Feminist critics attempted to re-interpret these narratives from a feminist perspective. Medusa, the monster, was re-interpreted as a positive and subversive female figure and her powers lying in beauty rather than horror (Shullenberger, 2008, p. 199) and Helen from a 'powerless object to desiring woman' (Dowden & Livingstone, 2011, p. 445). The idleness, passivity and monstrosity of female characters in these stories cause the thrust towards re-telling the stories of myths and fairytales by projecting female characters as active, powerful and independent, endowed with beauty that is desirable for any man. The narrative of Greek mythology, that woman was created by nature/god to be a bane to men, was challenged and rejected by feminist thinkers. According to them, this perpetuates an image of the woman that is miserable and so inherently inferior.

The feminist thinkers revolted against this symbolism as a revolt against distortion and defamation of a sex who has equal participation in population and domestic labor. Still, no recognition in terms of worth as the other gender always enjoys in public life. This revolt against symbolic in-signification that lies in the unconscious (as presumed by feminist thinkers) of whole humanity was a revolt towards signification. The radicalism of this revolt is expressed in Angela Carter's agreement with Marquis de Sade's imagery of women through pornography (Carter, 1978). She points out that Sade made it possible to perceive women apart from being a mother, sister, wife, daughter, or domesticated animal, so it is appreciable. Thus, the identity of women began to shift, a paradigm shift. But the question is, whether this identity claim as *woman* proved a journey worth overshadowing or deserting the less significant or insignificant identities of the *mother, sister, wife, or daughter*? Does feminism as a discourse ever really managed to have the rhetoric of emancipation? Language and the notion of existence are significant reminders in this regard. They reminded feminism of the limitations towards liberation (Moi, 1986).

But the question is, whether the woman was not considered a woman before this discourse comes to the surface? In America alone, this debate started in the late 19th century after social and political movements such as Seneca Falls Convention and the feminists' association with other movements such as Temperance and Abolitionist movements Anti-Vietnam war and civil rights movement to name some (Ryan, 1992). But the concern of this article is not a socio-political environment that gives

birth to different movements (except their relevance in the argument) but the philosophical analysis of feminism and the debate of rights they claim for the female sex. I will argue that the non – recognition of body/existence as one of the factors which contribute to the production of human consciousness created the dilemma for feminist discourse. They neglected the phenomenon of existence as a thing in the world and thus failed. Moreover, the impossibility of having an *écriture féminine* is also identified as a problem for feminist aspirations.

Language Problem of Feminism

Importance of Language

Language is not just one of man's possessions in the world, but on it depends the fact that man has a world at all (Gadamer, Weinsheimer, & Marshall, 2013, p. 459). The emphasis that has been laid by Gadamer on language brings forth its significance beyond its instrumental nature. Our very being opens up to other beings through language. It is a nucleus around which and through which we constitute a shared world of ideas. Saussure stretched this significance to an inseparable relation between language and thought. Any determinate thought needs to be conceived and expressed in the structure of language. Saussure stated that without language, thought is a vague, uncharted nebula (Wicks, 2013). The human being is prone to linguistic conditions. Man is surrounded by language in constructing and understanding the reality around him. He uses language to express, to be called and be identified in the social world. Language gives man the identity in the course of recognition, recollection and anticipation. Through language, he recognizes what has become past, registers them to his existing vocabulary and recollects those memories in the present. This interplay shapes the perception of reality for him. This inescapable character of language intensifies the need of feminist thinkers to address language as the prime discipline. Language becomes a cornerstone that has been taken up by the feminist thinkers to (1) criticize the linguistic-subordination of women, which they extracted from the everyday use of language and (2) to express their womanhood. The belief that there is a temporal relation between the body/self and text/writing wherein the first term pre-exists, indeed causes, the second is the assumption behind the importance of language (Freeman, 1988, p. 59).

Écriture Feminine

Feminist thinkers recognized the importance of language. They realized the impossibility of transcending the bounds of language. According to

Cheris Kramer, Barrie Thorne and Nancy Henley this bursting interest has renewed the attention towards language around the globe. Feminist thinkers focus their attention on the neglected topic of language and the expression of sex (Cameron, 1998, p. 945). The language has a constitutive role in structuring social reality and thus, feminist thinkers advocated a discourse that has no trace of patriarchy. They were suspicious of the language structure present in our society, in which we interact in the social world. According to them, the language is masculine, and it has become a tool to enforce suppression. They want to establish a language contrary to the one that projects differences between the sexes and celebrates it. Expressing the feminine self and body in the existing language is to strengthen the suppressive linguistic conditions that have been perpetuated since the day of creation as God himself addresses Himself with the masculine pronoun. This difference is embedded in language, culture, society and religion as symbols of signification. This difference that originates in the symbolic stage, as Lacan proposed, was tried to be overcome by a regress towards the pre-symbolic stage. They strive for a leap backward to the pre-symbolic stage, to devise a language that can express their self/sex without a difference. This difference urges feminist critics to disagree with the available language. The language becomes the site where gender relations can be contested. The phenomenon of language has been organized in a manner to disallow the individuation of the woman based on lack and absence (Ragland-Sullivan, 1982, p. 10).

In the pre-symbolic stage, the masculine/father (language, society, God) image has not yet been introduced and there were union and wholeness and thus no difference (Ragland-Sullivan, 1982, p. 8). The symbolic stage creates domination of masculine, father, law and language and thus creating a world where the woman is the object or alien to the man who is the subject. This suppressive and hegemonic mechanism of symbolism has been tried to be contested by *écriture féminine* (Jones, 1981, p. 253).

Problems in having a Feminine Language

Speaking about women's writing: about what it will do. Women must write her self: She must write about women and bring women to writing, as Cixous stated (Turner, 2016, p. 229). This explains the thrust that a text should be an unmediated experience of feminine body/self. Text by a woman must center itself around the passions and desires of a woman. Her unrestrained being should be the origin of the discourse if we wish to have any discourse at all (Freeman, 1988, p. 59). The meaning of the social world should be constituted in the framework of *écriture féminine*. It will

help in de-structuring the inherent opposition and suppression of the language.

Kristeva and Cixous center their interest in poetry and the freedom it allows escaping from the signification of symbolic order (patriarchy, society, law, language). Art (poetry) utters what cannot be uttered: instincts (Bedient, 1990, p. 807)

Poetry is pre-symbolic utterances. The richness of this pre-symbolic content was favored to flow freely. As Sellers claims, the eruption from pre-symbolic conscious, 'destroys accepted beliefs and traditional modes of signification, preparing the way for revolutionary change' (Sellers, 1991, p. 99). Kristeva herself confessed that these unfettered expressions if resiliently marred from expression, will lead to neurosis, schizophrenia and fanaticism of instincts (Bedient, 1990, p. 809). Thus, she tried to close any space other than poetry for liberation.

But how much the discourse has rewarded their efforts needs critical analysis. But before establishing a language that circumvents the women and the body of women, we must encounter some of the paradoxes that follow. Kristeva herself expressed concern for the regression towards the pre-symbolic phase. This will cause a problem as the fear of expressing unbridled instinctual energies will destroy the social norms and codes and Kristeva's fear was exemplified in Angela Carters praise for Marquis De Sade.

Theory of eternal feminine defined women as a womb, a sense of productivity and nurturance is assumed defining the female sex. But this assumption haunted the feminist thinkers who constitute negations along with varied conceptual frameworks such as pornography.

Angela Carter praised pornography and the symbolism involved in it as the appropriate and distinct imagery of the woman. 'While it was accepted that pornography reflected a sort of distilled essence of the entrenched binaries of patriarchal gender relations, the conflict revolved around the extent to which pornographic representations could be appropriated as a critique of the status quo and as a medium for the speculative imagining of alternatives' (Benson, 1998, p. 30). According to Angela Carter, pornography is an expression of the mass consciousness. It reflects the consciousness of human civilization as a whole. Pornography stresses upon the oppression of women because it conceives of sex purely in terms of power and thus reinforces men's impulses toward dominance (Bryfonski & Brubaker, 1982, p. 77).

Marquis de Sade, as a protagonist of this imagery, advocated the punishment and control of women through sexual means (Sawhney, 1999, p. 28). Thus, he advocated paranoia and sexual terror. Sade has a reception of contradictory nature. On the one hand, he has been regarded as misogynist (Gubar, 1987), whose writing reinforces the degrading representation of women. On the other hand, some feminist critics have appreciated Sade for surfacing the female sexuality and the tyranny of man in sex (Wilke & Cox, 1999). However, a new language would reinforce the inequality – the root cause on which the feminist movement based its foundations – as the labeling theory suggests. Labeling theory is also a part of the broader symbolic interactionist perspective in sociology (Macionis & Gerber, 2010). It suggests that an individual's self-concept, social identities of groups and even the social realities are influenced and even determined by the labels – or in negative cases, stigmas – that people assign them. A separate feminist language will consequently reinforce inequality and, as an outcome of self-fulfilling prophecy (Merton, 1948), will either strengthen the previous patriarchy, or develop a strict matriarchy, or it might result in an extreme unequal social arrangement doomed to anarchy.

Moreover, the imagery of women in pornography was celebrated by Carter. Sade inspired Angela Carter in this regard. According to some critics, Carter has celebrated the demythologization of female sexuality (Makinen, 1992, p. 4). Carter believed Sade had freed female sexuality of hegemonic and essentialist conceptions and identities. He has radically fictionalized the otherwise conventional identities.

Symbolic Interactionism

Sociological social constructionism rose in the late 1960s and mid-1970s. It created, contrary to the strength of positivist and functionalist human science, particularly in the North American frame of reference, two well-defined perspectives which subsequently persuaded social constructivism theory: the philosophy of North American and its sociological elaboration as symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934); and social phenomenology demonstrated by Alfred Schutz (1967). In *The social construction of reality* (1967), Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman incorporated these traditions, in which, for the first time, social construction nomenclature was used.

The symbolic interactionist theory can play an active role in apprehending the women's self-concept and rational processes in man dominance framework. Blumer underscored the interpretative procedure in the

development of the meaning of social experiences as individuals live them. For inferring the world of participants and their human social behavior, he consulted to Mead's "I" and "me" debate. Mead distinguishes the "I" and "me" as "periods of oneself," which are isolated simultaneously. However, they have a place together in the feeling of being portions of the world. One conceives oneself as a subject as well as an object, in the intervals of social life. The character as "I" is always a subject that responds to society and that builds its character while "me" is considered as an object which is actually the output of society. An individual's characteristics are fluid, who construct and reconstruct oneself and behave as a subject and an object accordingly. The Chicago School of interactionism conceptualized the concept of Blumer into Role-taking; defining and responding to ourselves are learned through the process of role taking in social standards and outlooks and it is crucial for the construction of self. Women often use role-taking in patriarchal context for survival, truce and cohesion of the family. Hence, in role-taking, the concept of power is there.

Upon these ideas, that self is a socially constructed body, symbolic interactionists such as Mead (1934), hence, use terms like 'internalization' from the external environment. The process of internalization, according to symbolic interactionists, begins through social patterns of communication and interaction. Thus, some women internalize their oppression as acceptable and universal, because they have internalized what others say about her. Others are forced to internalize the vices of oppression and patriarchy through arrangements of communication, even though they know about it. For instance, arrangements of communication between the spouses and the male and female members of the family may be internalized. This leads to the husband's views and perceptions about his counterpart, becoming the view of the wife about herself (Cast, 2003). As a consequence of this whole process, the wife forcefully accepts the oppression within marriage for the sake of stability and tranquility of the family. Similarly, the sociological explanations of gender propose that it is an enactment of a set of learned behavior followed by individuals to fulfill demands of associated sex category which is no more than a socially-situated performance and execution that is exhibited due to the ideologies, communities, discourse, social institutions, peer groups, and interaction with other members in society.

However, the whole case of socially constructed realities in the symbolic interactionist perspective is based on 'interaction' through 'symbols.' Language comprises almost the lion's share in these symbols. However, language itself is not transcendent from this construction. The language

we learn in any social context brings about the thoughts and patterns of our thoughts; a writer breathes life into the world he lives in. This notion purports that if we believe that language is an outcome of social construction emerged through patterns of communication, which happens to be a reflection of the social context in which the language begets, then, for sure, one can infer that language is culturally determined. Therefore, any language, its categories and structures, is a reflection of the social codes and mores of the society in which it exists.

Symbolic interactionists are always skeptical about communicating in a universal code of language and they work in reach of the theoretical frame of reference for the sociology of knowledge (Douglas & Johnson, 1978). They contend that the speaker, as well as hearer, come in contact in the situation when they both have a set of assumptions and social expectations. Genuine communication takes place when both are socialized in a similar manner. However, if the speaker or the hearer varies in assumptions and expectations, so, it may create misunderstanding between them. Daily communication is the result of when one comprehends what the other one thinks.

There are a variety of schools of thought which take different roads in explaining the role of language. One of them is the Deconstruction of language, led by the French as they proposed that language is the socially class conscious expression of power (Kiesling, 2007). Karl Marx, whom one cannot neglect to mention, viewed language as an influential tool of class consciousness and to veil class control (Philips, 1992). Poststructuralist and post-modernist followed suit. Language clearly brought a process of causes and effects. Moreover, Jean-Paul Sartre, exuded that the role of language is to maintain the status quo of the society's class structure. To support his argument, Sartre used the evidence from early writings of literature and, claimed that those were written by the powerful and, that the purpose of language and, therefore, the knowledge in it, only in access to its contemporaries for the comprehension of the socio-cultural content.

Existential Problem of Feminism

Feminists demand equality in social, political and religious spheres of existence. This is the most contested phenomenon for feminist theoreticians. According to Elshtain, social and political readjustment is the perennial foci of the feminist movement (Elshtain, 1975, p. 452). In religion, they have an affirmative resonance in St. Paul. There is neither male or female, for you are all one in and for Christ Jesus (Thatcher, 2011,

p. 149). But even after all this enumeration, the existential impediment seems inevitable. Equality between the two sexes derives from the recognition of a biological sameness. Male and female are considered equal if they are the same anatomically (Irvine, 1990, p. 16). Likewise, Helen Lambert believes that sex difference is not necessarily universal; they are biologically same (Lambert, 1978, p. 97). This recognition of biological sameness is difficult. As Lacan was of the opinion that sexual difference is neither symbolic nor imaginary but somewhat real (Copjec, p. 145). The recognition of difference is unavoidable. This unavoidability is an existential reality. One of the problems with the feminist discourse is to stress upon the difference and deprive women of agency and historicity. Women should accept that they are bodily existence (Vintges, 1999, p. 135). Existence is an impasse, a consciousness of one's own existence, thus our crude situatedness. Any signification can only be achieved through an existential perspective. The neutralization of the difference between the sexes can be termed as the genocide, which is the most dangerous of abandoning the identity of women (Farmer & Pasternack, 2003, p. 28). Therefore, we can never overcome sexual differences.

Conclusion

Women have been given a significant place in humanity. Humanity's completion is not possible without women. We cannot imagine human civilization without the existence of female sex or more desirably without a woman. She is the progenitor of the race and humanity. There is always a mutual conflict between the two sexes, as they always have varying degrees of values and responses. The acceptance of their differences is the pronounced harmony that can be given to them rather than announcing their differences as domination and subordination. Man is inherently infested with a conflicting nature and this conflict may occur between the sexes as well. The conflict of being different from the other is insoluble, unavoidable. Sexual differences are conceived as un-addressable linguistically and irreducible existentially; there can be no absolute harmony. But pronouncing them loud will cause the ripples of hatred and violence. The sexual differences can only infuriate a debate on the subject and the other. Where woman as other will always be condemned to receive aggression. According to Simone de Beauvoir, the woman is a social construct (Fallaise, Fallaise, & de Beauvoir, 1998, p. 66) and she can transcend these limits linguistically and existentially. But that transcendence can only have occurred within herself. She always remains in contact with the language as the house of being (Heidegger, 1982) and with her existence, being there in the world (*Ethics*, p. 42). The division

between these sexes is a biological fact, not an event in history that can be surmounted. The couple (man and woman) is a fundamental unity with its two halves riveted together, and the cleavage of society along the line of sex is impossible (Bailey & Martin, 2011, p. 857).

In the end, there is a need to establish consideration for the equality of the sexes in the sense of difference. One cannot eliminate the difference between the sexes with which we are debating at large. It needs to be understood; as Irigaray stated, to go beyond a limit, there must be a boundary (Irigaray, 2004, p. 20). To touch one another in intersubjectivity, two subjects must agree for a relationship. Only then will there be a possibility and consent to exist. Each must have the opportunity to be a concrete, corporeal and sexuate subject, rather than an abstract, neutral, fabricated, and fictitious one.

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