
The Politics of Knowledge in Feminist Literary Theory

To a substantial degree, the political system of patriarchy is dependent on the manipulation of knowledge. The biological, psychological, and economic discrimination against women, as well as other marginal groups, has relied upon the establishment of a singular construction of “truth” that is fundamentally exclusionary, yet regarded within the system as natural and objective. What is considered “outside” or “other” than the dominant notion of “truth” as defined by this patriarchal system is regarded as inferior and secondary. The political situation of women, as marginalized outsiders, has thereby relied upon a system of misrepresentation and misinterpretation. Feminist theory has thus been concerned with unraveling this long history of discrimination through the re-appropriation of knowledge by and about women. This project may sound straightforward, but the nature of knowledge for feminist theory is problematic on many levels, from linguistic and psychological to social and historical. This process of rebalancing the politics of knowledge involves validating female literary production, battling basic binary oppositions such as male/female that have been internalized by women themselves, breaking down representations of women based on such binary oppositions, and finding an authentic female voice and language that is not marked by the psychological and social conditioning of patriarchal society, among others. These goals and projects are crucial if a knowledge emptied and freed of patriarchal influence is to be found and established.

The beginning of the problematizing of knowledge within a political context can be said to begin with Virginia Woolf’s seminal work, *A Room of One’s Own*. Woolf points to the persistent suppression of female literary production, as women are kept from learning and confined to the roles of wife and mother. If a woman in Shakespeare’s time had comparable genius, she “would certainly have gone crazed, shot herself, or ended her days in some lonely cottage outside the village, half witch, half wizard, feared and mocked at” (Woolf, 75). Despite holding potential and capability, and without social and economic freedom, or “a room of one’s own,” women are kept imprisoned by ideologies of what a “woman” is. In this way, Woolf recognizes that gender identity is constructed by “law and custom” and can consequently be challenged. In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir further elaborates on the constructed ideologies of womanhood that are regarded as natural and true. De Beauvoir points to how “man defines the human, not woman, in an imbalance which goes back to the Old Testament... Woman is riveted into a lop-sided relationship with man: he is the ‘One’, she is the ‘Other.’” Such modes of representation are fundamentally political, as “man’s dominance has secured an ideological climate of compliance: ‘legislators, priests, philosophers, writers and scientists have striven to show that the subordinate position of woman is willed in heaven and advantageous on earth’” (Selden; Widdowson; Brooker, 119-120). Such supposed “knowledge” of the meaning of womanhood has been used for centuries to keep women subjugated to men.

Following from Woolf and de Beauvoir’s recognition that the “knowledge” of gender identity is in fact socially constructed is the exploration of how these constructs are formed and maintained. For a number of feminist literary theorists, language is a primary source of this construction. Semiotics has taught us that our ideas are not linked by any natural means to the words that are meant to represent them. That is, “the bond between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary” (Saussure, 272). Further, as poststructuralism has demonstrated, this process of signification is fundamentally unstable. Signifiers are not naturally linked to what they

signify; rather, they “lead a chameleon-like existence, changing their colours with each new context” (Selden; Widdowson; Brooker, 145). This context through which language is formulated is historical, social, and ultimately political.

According to Michel Foucault, “what is ‘true’ depends on who controls the discourse’ (Selden; Widdowson; Brooker, 121), “discourse” being defined as what “determines what it is possible to say, what are the criteria of “truth”, who is allowed to speak with authority, and where such speech can be spoken” (Selden; Widdowson; Brooker, 147). In a patriarchal system, it is men that hold this authority. They control meaning, being the arbitrary relations between signifiers and signifieds. For feminist literary theory, this has meant a long history of negative representations of women, from Aristotle’s contention that “the female is female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities” and John Donne’s reiteration of Aquinas’s notion that “form is masculine and matter feminine: the superior, godlike, male intellect impresses its form upon the malleable, inert, female matter” (Selden; Widdowson; Brooker, 115). Women are seen as passive, weak and inferior, while men are seen as active, strong and superior, among a great number of binary oppositions that comprise perhaps the strongest binary opposition of all, that of male/female.

The discourse of patriarchy has thus kept women in a secondary state, beneath that of the dominant social group. According to this “symbolic order of culture” women “do not speak, desire, or produce meaning for themselves, as men do, by means of the exchange of women.” Recalling de Beauvoir’s observation of woman as the symbol for “Other,” women are only considered human beings insofar as they are like men. In short, the “human subject” can only be conceived as male (de Lauretis, 298). In this sense, the “domination of discourse” by men “has trapped women in women inside a male ‘truth’” (Selden; Widdowson; Brooker, 121). The challenge for all women is how to break free of this knowledge system, and by extension, the repressive political order that is supported by it.

This challenge begins with an understanding of male “knowledge” as a system of constructions that keeps women oppressed, and efforts to recover alternative truths written by women themselves. Kate Millet’s work, *Sexual Politics*, was pivotal in solidifying the notion that patriarchy is a pervasive “political institution” that “subordinates the female to the male or treats the female as an inferior male” (Selden; Widdowson; Brooker, 123). Borrowing from social science the difference between sex and gender, where “sex is determined biologically but ‘gender’ is a psychological concept which refers to culturally acquired sexual identity” she attacks “social scientists who treat the culturally learned ‘female’ characteristics (passivity etc.) as ‘natural’” (Selden; Widdowson; Brooker, 124). Millet privileges literature as a space in which the culturally imposed knowledge that is keeping women politically repressed can be and has been challenged. However, given that men have long shaped “literary values and conventions,” it is “possible for the female reader to collude (unconsciously) in this patriarchal positioning and read ‘as a man’” (Selden; Widdowson; Brooker, 125). That is, while breaking down the illusory knowledge that supports patriarchy is certainly fruitful, it is difficult to remove oneself entirely from the system whilst working within its confines.

Elaine Showalter refers to this practice of deconstructing the ideology underlying “the images and stereotypes of women in literature, the omissions and misconceptions about women in criticism, and women-assign in semiotic systems” as “feminist reading or the feminist critique” (Showalter, 459). While this work is certainly illuminating and rewarding, it is limited to merely “redressing a grievance” and building upon “existing models.” Showalter argues that this

“feminist obsession with correcting, modifying, supplementing, revising, humanizing or even attacking male critical theory keeps us dependent upon it and retards our progress in solving our own theoretical problems”. As long as feminist literary theorists “look to androcentric models for out most basic principles—even if we revise them by adding the feminist frame of reference—we are learning nothing new”. Beyond merely revising male-centred discourse, what feminist criticism needs is to find “its own subject, its own system, its own theory, and its own voice” (Showalter, 260). This involves rejecting the male canon in favour of literature by women, through which the formerly male human subject can be conceived as female as well.

Showalter’s concern with finding alternative methods of reading and interpretation is echoed within the work of French feminist theorists such as Helene Cixous and Julia Kristeva. Both attempt through their writings to subvert and reorder the symbolic order that keeps women politically repressed. In “Castration or Decapitation?” Cixous focuses on the masculine economy of power that keeps women passive, silent, and powerless. According to Freud and Lacan, woman is “outside the Symbolic, that is outside of language, the place of the Law, excluded from any possible relationship with culture and the cultural order” (Cixous, 483). This is because she lacks the “transcendental signifier” of the phallus, which orders masculinity. Without this lack, she cannot participate in the construction of meaning, leaving her outside the masculine economy. The masculine economy is defined by the concept of debt, wherein “the child owes his parents his life and his problem is exactly how to repay them.” This obligation is threatening to man, who wants to “hastily... to return the gift, to break the circuit of exchange that could have no end” in order to “owe no one a thing.” Difficulty arises when this system is confronted with love, which is “hard to give back” since it is in a sense a gift, but one that has no definable way of repaying; it is open-ended. Woman, as the object of love, is consequently “the place of this mystery” and “stands in the place of not knowing” as her role as “Other.” This dynamic enables man to define his masculinity, “to keep overcoming, dominating, subduing, putting his manhood to the test, against the mystery he has to keep forcing back” (Cixous, 485). In this masculine economy, woman is kept passive and silent. Cixous then explores the notion of an alternative economy wherein women regain their voice and power, affirming their difference and creating their own knowledge, thereby rejecting the knowledge of the masculine economy in which woman only exists in relation to man. For Cixous, this requires allowing women to speak and to write, but not to produce writing “that’s in effect masculine.” Here, language stands on its own as being masculine or feminine, so that the gender of the text does not determine which economy it is representing. A true female text is “an exploration of woman’s powers” that is fundamentally political and defined by a “female libidinal economy” based on the fullness of the “gift” that is not withheld. The feminine text is overflowing in its openness and ability to cross limits, in contrast to the closed and incorporated masculine “system of returns” that is marked by withholding and resolving debt (Cixous, 489-490). In this way, Cixous challenges how ideas of “woman” have been constructed within patriarchal culture, offering a way for women to re-imagine and re-construct their own textual representations, and ultimately gaining the power that comes with such knowledge.

In “Stabat Mater” Julia Kristeva similarly explores the notion of a “feminine text.” Stylistically, her essay is non-linear and decentred, retaining an open discourse that consciously subverts that of Cixous’ closed, masculine economy. The work consists of a dialogue between abstracted idea of mother, versus the mother as an actual, individual woman, that is, between the Virgin Mary and Kristeva’s own experiences as a mother in the twentieth century. In this way, Kristeva challenges the abstracted fantasy of idealized motherhood as represented by the mythical Virgin Mary, seeking a more authentic representation not just for herself, but also for all

mothers. Kristeva deconstructs and exposes the historical roots of the symbolism surrounding the “virginal cult in Christianity” (Kristeva, 188). Aside this linear narrative is a poetic and openly personal description of the experience of childbirth and motherhood. The result is both an explanation and a demonstration that motherhood “today remains, after the Virgin, without a discourse” (Kristeva, 202).

While the radically non-linear linguistic explorations of Cixous and Kristeva are certainly fruitful, they also risk moving away from the important political aspects of overcoming such conventional representations of women. Where ‘woman’ is recognized as “not a physical being but a ‘writing-effect’” feminist theory may become overly abstracted from the quite physical and embodied focus of its analysis. What is important to many theorists is maintaining the contextual and political aspects of the discourses within feminist theory. That is, ensuring that above all that feminist literary theory contains a social critique, despite ontological difficulties “about the nature of speech [and] about the status of significance” which “forces us to reconceive the very concepts and relations of ‘self’ and ‘world’” (Con Davis; Schleifer, 569). This raises a new debate about the political ramifications of the nature of perception and the possibility of an exclusive female subjectivity. This is in many ways a return to a central conflict within feminist thought: namely, who is it that is said to “know” and what power does this “knower” hold?

Diana Fuss addresses the problems raised by the idea of an inherent female subjectivity in “Reading like a Feminist.” She asks, “What is it exactly that underwrites and subtends the notion of a class of women or a class of men reading?” (Fuss, 581). To assume that women hold their own particular way of reading and writing is an “essentialist” viewpoint, essentialism being “what is taken for granted, assumed, or presented as ‘natural’ in discourse (Con Davis; Schleifer, 566). In this sense, to assume the existence of a female subjectivity as many feminist theorists is to move away from discipline’s social constructionist roots, whereby terms such as “woman” and “feminist” are themselves arbitrary and politicized distinctions.

Fuss argues that the construction of “a class of women” based on “‘essence’ or ‘experience’” leaves no space for “the real, material differences between women” such as “class, race, national, or other criteria”. Where in such categories are the differences between “‘third world’ readers, lesbian readers, and working-class readers?” Given their “generality”, essentialist categories such as “‘the female experience’ or ‘the male experience’” are ultimately of “limited epistemological usefulness” because their reference point is one that is continually shifting and far too diverse (Fuss, 583-585). Fuss supports this viewpoint using Lacan’s poststructuralist psychoanalytic theory of the unstable subject, whereby the “‘I’...is not given at birth but rather is constructed, assumed, taken on during the subject’s problematic entry into the Symbolic”. It follows that “the question ‘who is speaking’ can only be answered by shifting the grounds of the question to ‘where am I speaking from?’” (Fuss, 586). In other words, subjectivity is always determined by the social, historical, and political position from which one speaks or acts. There is no intrinsic “feminist approach to reading”; rather, “ways of reading are historically specific and culturally variable, and reading positions are constructed, assigned, or mapped”. Essentializing notions such as “a shared woman’s experience” or “a female reader” are thus inaccurate theoretical grounds. The only stable essence within feminist theory, Fuss concludes, is politics, as “politics is precisely the self-evident category in feminist discourse—that which is most irreducible and most indispensable” (Fuss, 589-590). In this sense, essentialist categories such as “class” and “women” are political constructs that should only be used sparingly and strategically for political ends as “determined by the subject-position from which one speaks” (Fuss, 587). For feminist theory, this means that the essentialist

category of women as a class” should be retained only “for political purposes” so that “politics emerges as feminism’s essence” (Fuss, 590).

In “Pandora’s Box: Subjectivity, Class and Sexuality in Socialist Feminist Criticism” Cora Kaplan also emphasizes the need for feminist theory to maintain its own “radical social critique” in order to remain connected to the very social processes from which it arises. Kaplan argues that feminist criticism is “implicitly conservative in its assumptions about social hierarchy and female subjectivity, the Pandora’s box for all feminist theory” (Kaplan, 593). Like Fuss, Kaplan focuses on the need for feminist criticism to attend to social and historical context: “...“without the class and race perspectives which socialist feminist critics bring to the analysis both of the literary texts and of their conditions of production, liberal feminist criticism, with its emphasis on the unified female subject, will unintentionally reproduce the ideological values of the mass-market romance” that “tends to represent sexual difference as natural and fixed”. Kaplan outlines three strategies which feminism has employed to deal with the problem of “the concept of the inner self and moral psyche”. Firstly, “women’s psychic life” was deemed to be “essentially identical to men’s” although “distorted through vicious and systematic patriarchal inscription”. The second strategy seeks to validate women’s psyche as inherently different from men, and often “in direct opposition”. The last strategy refuses to acknowledge the issue of gender construction in this way, viewing the notion of psychic difference as ideological (Kaplan 595-596). Kaplan rejects all of these strategies. Rather than seek out a unified female subjectivity through a common method reading or writing, or through the commonality of the body, her strategy is to distance any such universal representations of women’s experience as a source of fact. Instead, Kaplan argues in favour of the inclusion of additional social categories such as class, recognizing that there is a “fusion of class and gender meanings” in literary representation (Kaplan, 602-604). It is this particular sort of historical understanding of the female subject that “we must uncover and consider”. As opposed to seeking stable, transhistorical answers to questions of what characterizes femininity or female textuality, Kaplan proposes that the psyche be redefined as “a structure, not as a content”. In that way race and class are included in feminist politics, and it is through the analysis “of how these social divisions and the inscription of gender” surrounding the historical subject “are mutually secured and given meaning” that “we can work towards change” (Kaplan, 609-610).

In “Variations on Sex and Gender: Beauvoir, Wittig and Foucault” Judith Butler, like Fuss, resists the notion of a female essence. Drawing on Beauvoir’s statement that “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” Butler assumes that “become” means “purposely assume or embody”. She then asks the question, “If genders are in some sense chosen, then what happens to the definition of gender as a cultural interpretation of sex, that is, what happens to the ways in which we are, as it were, already culturally interpreted? How can gender be both a matter of choice and a cultural construction?” (Butler, 612). The answer to this question rests on the manner in which the body and embodiment has been culturally interpreted. That is, the binary in which men have been associated with “the disembodied or transcendent feature of human existence” while women account for the opposite, representing the “bodily and immanent feature of human existence”. Since in this symbolic order women are the “Other” for men, it follows that in order to “safeguard” their disembodiment, men have needed to keep women embodied (Butler, 615). Following from the Hegel’s master-slave dialectic, man is considered master of the bodily sphere, having transcended it, while women are kept enslaved within the body (Butler, 616). This cultural interpretation of the body demonstrates that “natural sex is a fiction” and what may be considered “distinctly feminine” is merely a historical development with the end cause of men holding authority over the female body (Butler, 620).

Butler concludes that women do not “belong in the order of being”, rather they are locked into “a mode of becoming that is arrested prematurely” by the “reductive imposition” of a category that decides what she is supposed to mean in relation to men. To overcome this categorization, “the task is not simply to change language, but to analyze language for its ontological assumptions, and to criticize those assumptions for their political consequences”. In sum, it can be concluded that “women have no essence at all” since they have no true signification beyond the role as symbolic “Other” within patriarchal discourse. It follows, then, that women have “no natural necessity” as well, for “what we call an essence or a material fact is simply an enforced cultural option which has disguised itself as natural truth” (Butler, 622). In this sense, Butler’s conclusion can be seen as the culmination of the criticism of Fuss and Kaplan, wherein retaining essentialist categories such as “women” or “femininity” that suggests a unified female subjectivity must be rejected entirely in order to break free of a politically repressive, male-dominated discourse.

A central concern of feminist theory is the importance of locating and tearing down the systems of knowledge that support patriarchy. Recognizing that it is through the unnatural constructs of what is considered inherently “female” that women have been politically repressed, feminist theory is faced with the formidable political challenge of breaking free of this male-dominated discourse. This project has meant denaturalizing and deconstructing the “objective knowledge” that has justified patriarchal oppression and attempting to regain control of the meanings and representations associated with “female.” The manner in which this occurs, however, is very much disputed.

The viewpoints of Fuss, Kaplan and Butler contrast on several levels with those of Showalter, Cixous and Kristeva. Where the latter strive to uncover what it is that makes women “different” through their language and literary history, and by exploring the possibility of a “woman-text,” the former resist ascribing women with any such “essence” at all. The problem with re-interpreting and re-presenting what is considered “female” can be seen to rest on conceptions of difference. Early theorists have sought to validate “female” difference while remaining within an essentially male-dominated discourse. Many insights have come from deconstructing male representations of women and re-imagining how “woman” may be freely expressed in text. However, this feminist discourse is fundamentally reactionary as it retains the male/female binary opposition. Seeking the “essence” of the “female” effectively validates this binary. To be “gynocentric” or “woman-centred” implies that the binary of centre/periphery has merely been redrawn, shifting the terms of inequality rather than eradicating them altogether. The work of Fuss, Kaplan, and Butler demonstrate that such binaries should be surpassed altogether. Affirming the fundamentally political nature of feminist discourse, these theorists renew feminism’s focus on the social and historical contexts in which knowledge is formulated. Like the work of earlier theorists, the notion of singular or universal “truths” that are removed from time or place is problematized. Such notions lead to a privileging of some narratives over others; focusing on the contextual differences between all narratives neutralizes this conflict. However, this later feminist theory does not concern itself with replacing old representations of “woman”; rather, it focuses on the variety of social, historical, and political differences that have been marginalized by male-dominated discourse. The new discourse encompasses a range of knowledges that surpass that of generalized “woman” to include class, race, ethnicity, homosexuality, and many others, in a process that is materialist, political, and revolutionary.

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