

# Introduction: Feminist Paradigms

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Contemporary feminist literary criticism begins as much in the women's movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s as it does in the academy. Its antecedents go back much further, of course, whether one takes Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* or an even earlier text as a point of departure (Maggie Humm cites *Inanna*, a text written 2,000 years before the Bible, which presents the fate of a goddess who questions sexual discourse). Feminist criticism's self-transformations over the past several decades as it engages with both critiques from within and encounters from without - encounters with psychoanalysis, Marxism, Post-Structuralisms, ethnic studies, post-colonial theory, and lesbian and gay studies - have produced a complex proliferation of work not easily subsumed to a single description. The title of a recent collection of essays - *Conflicts in Feminism* - speaks to the situation of feminist criticism at the present: equality versus difference, cultural feminism versus Post-Structuralist feminism, essentialism versus social constructionism. Feminism *and* gender theory? Feminism *or* gender theory? Feminism with ethnic specificity or with other crossings? Feminism national or feminism international? If the student of literature in the early 1970s was moved to ask why is there not a *feminist* criticism, the student of literary theory in the late 1990s might well be moved to shift the emphasis and ask but why is there not *a* feminist criticism? The frustrations of proliferation can also be construed as the pains of progress, and if the tone of feminist criticism has lost the celebratory solidarity of its early days, it has gained a much needed complexity of analysis. An analysis of gender that "ignores" race, class, nationality, and sexuality is one that assumes a white, middle-class, heterosexual woman inclined toward motherhood as the subject of feminism; only by questioning the status of the subject of feminism - "woman" - does a feminist criticism avoid replicating the masculinist cultural error of taking the dominant for the universal.

For the women's movement of the 1960s and early 1970s the subject of feminism was women's experience under patriarchy, the long tradition of male rule in society which silenced women's voices, distorted their lives, and treated their concerns as peripheral. To be a woman under such conditions was in some respects not to exist at all. "When We Dead Awaken" seemed to Adrienne Rich a justified title for an address regarding women at the Modern Language Association in 1970. With other noteworthy feminists of the 1960s and 1970s like Germaine Greer (*The Female Eunuch*) and Kate Millett (*Sexual Politics*), Rich inspired into life a school of feminist literary criticism that took the history of women's oppression and the silencing of their voices as twin beacons to guide its work. But how was that history to be interpreted, those voices to be read? Were they the voices of fellow beings who

shared a common biology or ontology? Or were history and social context so constitutive of all being that no thing called "woman" could be said to exist outside them? Was "woman" something to be escaped from or into?

Early on, feminist scholars realized that the "canon" taught in schools was overwhelmingly male. To be a woman graduate student in the 1960s was to hear recognizably male points of view, some of which were noticeably misogynist, declared to be "universal." Were there no women writers, then, aside from George Eliot and Jane Austen, Willa Gather or Emily Dickinson? And how were feminist scholars to deal with the canon? Elaine Showalter set about reconstructing a history of women writers (*A Literature of Their Own*). Judith Fetter ley took up the question of how women are represented in "great" American literature (*The Resisting Reader*). And Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar examined the issue of what it meant for women writers to seek entry to a tradition dominated by images that did such violence to women (*The Madwoman in the Attic*).

The movement very quickly leapt across ethnic and gender boundaries (if indeed, given Rich's work both on her own ethnicity and her own gender difference, it might not be said to always have been across such boundaries). African American feminist scholars like Mary Helen Washington, Barbara Smith, and bell hooks depicted a history of African American women's experience along the twin axes of race and gender that had a unique specificity. Lesbian feminist critics like Bonnie Zimmerman and Susan Griffin reconstructed a hidden tradition of lesbian writing and explored the experience of radical alterity within a heterosexist world. Feminist literary scholarship in the 1970s and early 1980s was a rich, sometimes vexed, sometimes convivial, world in which words like "sisterhood" had a certain currency.

This early period is sometimes described as having two stages, one concerned with the critique of misogynist stereotypes in male literature, the other devoted to the recovery of a lost tradition and to the long labor of historical reconstruction. Banished from education and from public life, women writers had found refuge in literary forms despised by men, in diaries and letters and in sentimental fiction. Feminist scholars began to notice how the seemingly disinterested aesthetic categories that imbued literary scholarship in the academy automatically disqualified such writing from consideration for inclusion in the canon.

The mid-1980s are in retrospect a moment of great change in feminist criticism. What is called "French feminism" - essentially the work of Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, and Helene Cixous - began to have an impact on how feminist scholars thought about their work and about the assumptions that inspired it. "Woman," that unproblematic "character" of feminist stories about the world, suddenly became a matter of interpretation. Gender, rather than be the sight line that allowed one to trace woman's banishment from an androcentric culture, might instead be a construct of culture, something written into the psyche by language. Liberal and radical feminists had been in disagreement since the 1970s regarding the direction the women's movement should take - toward a deeper identification with a female "essence" or toward a departure from the way women had been made to be by patriarchy, the very thing radical feminists construed as essentially female. That difference now gained volatility within feminist literary critical discussions, and two perspectives began to form, one "constructionist" or accepting of the idea that gender is made by culture in history, the other "essentialist," more inclined to the idea that gender reflects a natural difference between men and women that is as much psychological, even linguistic, as it is

biological. And there was no possible meeting of minds between the two, for each necessarily denied the other. Feminism was suddenly feminisms.

Each perspective derived support from different theoretical sources, and both, curiously enough, found support in French Post-Structuralism. The essentialists looked to the work of feminist psychoanalyst Nancy Chodorow (*The Reproduction of Mothering*), ethical philosopher Carol Gilligan (*In a Different Voice*), and French feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray (*Speculum of the Other Woman* and *This Sex Which Is Not One*) and argued that women's physical differences alone (birthing, lactation, menstruation, etc.) make them more connected with matter or with the physical world than men. Luce Irigaray distinguishes between blood and sham, between the direct link to material nature in women's bodies and the flight from such contact that is the driving force of male abstraction, its pretense to be above matter and outside of nature (in civilization). She notes how matter (which she links etymologically to maternity and to the matrix, the space that is the prop for male philosophical speculation or abstract thinking) is irreducible to male Western conceptuality; outside and making possible, yet impossible to assimilate to male reason, matter is what makes women women, an identity and an experience of their own, forever apart from male power and male concepts.

Women, essentialists argued, are innately capable of offering a different ethics from men, one more attuned to preserving the earth from destruction by weapons devised by men. Men must abstract themselves from the material world as they separate from mothers in order to acquire a license to enter the patriarchy, and they consequently adopt a violent and aggressive posture toward the world left behind, which is now construed as an "object." The primary matter they must separate from is the mother, who for them represents the tie to nature that must be overcome by the cut into abstraction that inaugurates civilization as men understand it (a set of abstract rules for assigning identities, appropriate social roles and the like that favor male power over women). Women, on the other hand, are not required to separate from the mother as they acquire a gender identity; they simply identify with the closest person to them as they grow up, their own mother. No cut is required, no separation that launches a precarious journey toward a fragile "identity" predicated on separation that simply denies its links to the physical world. Essentialist feminists argued that men think in terms of rights when confronted with ethical issues, while women think in terms of responsibilities to others. Women are more caring because their psychological and physical ties to physical being remain unbroken.

While one strand of essentialist theory finds common ground with Post-Structuralism around the body (that which male-defined reason must transcend but which includes and exceeds it always), another finds in Post-Structuralism an argument against all identity. What lies outside male reason is precisely everything such reason abhors - contradiction, nonidentity, fluidity, nonrationality, illogicality, mixing of genres, etc. Domination through categorical analysis (the violent cut of distinction) is impossible in the realm of matter where things flow into one another and are unamenable to philosophical opposition. Woman names this nonidentity, and her language, what the French feminists call *écriture féminine* or feminine writing, is exercised in a heterogeneous style that deliberately undermines all the hierarchical orders of male rationalist philosophy by breaking from the ideal of coherent meaning and good rational style. (It should be noted that for writers like Cixous, feminine writing also characterizes the work of male writers like Joyce.)

The constructivist position took inspiration from the Marxist theory of the social construction of individual subjectivity (Althusser) and from the Post-Structuralist idea that language writes rather than reflects identities. Gender identity is no less a construction of patriarchal culture than the idea that men are somehow superior to women; both are born at the same time and with the same stroke of the pen. The psychology or identity that feminist essentialists think is different from men's is merely the product of conditioning under patriarchy, a conditioning to be caring, relational, and maternal that may make women seem more ethical than men, but a conditioning nonetheless. The constructionists worried that the essentialists were taking an effect to be a cause, interpreting the subordination of women as women's nature. What must change, they contended, is not the way androcentric culture traps and stifles a woman's identity that should be liberated into separation, but rather the way all gender, both male and female, is fabricated. Marxist feminists especially noted that much of what the essentialists took to be signs of a good female nature were in fact attributes assigned women in capitalist culture to make them better domestic laborers, better angels in the house.

At its most radical, the constructivist counter-paradigm embraces such categories as performativity, masquerade, and imitation, which are seen as cultural processes that generate gender identities that only appear to possess a pre-existing natural or material substance. Of more importance than physical or biological difference might be psychological identity (across a range from "masculine" to "feminine," from aggressivity and self-assertiveness to emotional flexibility and psychological relation-ality). Women can be just as much "masculine" as men, and biological men might simply be "masculine" (or pretend to be such) only out of obedience to cultural codes. Feminist critics like Judith Butler began to argue in the mid-1980s that all gender is "performative," an imitation of a code that refers to no natural substance. Masculine means not feminine as much as it means anything natural. Susan Jeffords in *The Remasculinization of American Culture* notices, for example, that male masculinity in US culture after the Vietnam War is constructed through an expulsion of emotional traits associated with femininity.

The encounter with psychoanalysis has been crucial to the development of contemporary feminist thinking about literature and culture. Millett attacked Freud's most noteworthy mistakes regarding women, but later feminists have argued that the engagement with psychoanalysis should not be one entirely of rejection. Juliet Mitchell has argued that what is important about Freud is the theory of engendering. Gender is socially constructed, and although Freud's own account is patriarchal, other accounts are possible, as are other ways of constructing human subjectivity. While Freud favored the Oedipal drama of gender inscription, whereby the father's intervention between mother and son initiates the separation that preserves civilization, feminists have urged that greater attention be given the pre-Oedipal period, one shaped by the child's relationship with its mother (at least in traditional households in which men work and women do domestic labor). In the mother-child relationship might be found more of the constituents of identity (as object relations psychoanalytic theory claims) than are given during the later Oedipal stage. This shift in attention has the virtue of displacing a central theoretical premise of patriarchal culture - that fathers determine sexual identity - but it broaches the dangerous possibility of reducing a sociological postulate - mothering - to a biological destiny. Is "mothering" constructed within patriarchy as the other of "fathering" (understood

as nondomestic labor), or is it a value, an ideal, and a human relationship that offers a way out of patriarchy, a different voice and perhaps even a different language?

Feminist literary criticism moves with time from the criticism of writing by men and the exploration of writing by women to a questioning of what it means at all to engage with or in language. If all language carries worlds within it, assumptions and values that lie embedded in the simplest of utterances, then how can women take up such language, the language of patriarchy, and hope to use it to forge a better world for women? Or is language neutral, an indifferent instrument that can be wielded in any number of socially constructive ways? And what does it mean here to speak of "a better world for women"? Is that not to nominate into an indifferent identity a splintered multiplicity of women's lives around the world and around any one community or society? And if feminism, in its inspiration, is about the painful particularities of any one person's experience, their right to be heard despite centuries of deafness and deliberate, systematic muting, then how can it especially name into silence voices that know no language with which to speak? Shouldn't women especially know what it means to need to speak and be denied a language with which to speak? Yet isn't to speak for "other" women, women outside the glow of the tent lights of highly literate literary culture, even if it is to take up their cause and stand in for them at the podium of history, to do what men have always done for women? How can language be given when it takes so much away? Yet a woman was stoned to death on March 30, 1997, for being in the company of someone not of her "kin." If silence is complicity, what form should speech take in such a situation? Should it adopt the language of rights, the one created by men? Or is there a different construction of the problem, one less abstract, made more angry by painful experience, that is more appropriately "feminist"?

At its outer boundary, the feminist literary criticism that arose in the 1960s and 1970s in the US and the Commonwealth countries discovers the conditions as well as the limits of its own possibility in language and in literacy. And by looking beyond the boundary it encounters its own origin in the pain of denied speech and the presumption of assigned speech. There as well, perhaps, from the achieved vantage of an international, transethnic, parasexual perspective, it discovers a field of work that takes it back beyond its own beginning in the emergence from silence into language - to undo the silence of those who still do not speak.

#### Notes

- 1 Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller, eds., *Conflicts in Feminism* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990).
- 2 Adrienne Rich, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," in *On Lies, Secrets Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978* (New York: Norton, 1979).