

Feminine Writing as an Alternative to the Patriarchal Language

By Seda Peksen

In order to understand why and how feminine writing emerged, it is essential to have a knowledge of the system of the patriarchal language and its hegemonic power. One has to have a clear idea of the use of language as a weapon for political aims, for domination. Therefore, it is necessary first to take a look at Lacan's theories on entering the symbolic order, that is, the entrance into the patriarchal discourse. After realizing how this phallogocentric structure works, how it dominates and controls all aspects of human life, then it would be easier to find means to deconstruct it because then women would know where to turn to in order to base their own language on. After acquiring that knowledge, women would realize that they should go back to the presymbolic stage, step outside the realm of language and start anew. Thus, it would be useful to see what Kristeva says about this preoedipal stage which she calls the semiotic, and also Cixous's revolutionary argument on writing the body. It is, therefore, the aim of this paper to analyse how all these theories were brought together by women to create a language of their own, which they called '*écriture féminine*', as a reaction against the patriarchal language and what their primary motive was. It is also in the scope of this paper to find out how this new language is used for the benefit of women's movement.

To start from the beginning, one should turn back to the stage Lacan calls the Real. This is the stage that an infant goes through just before it enters the language. The Real is important because it is the stage in which there is no law, no patriarchy, no domination. It is also important since it is the stage that women should go back to in order to find their own language. The significance of the Real stems from the fact that in it there is no language. There is only union, wholeness. All demands are met. There is no lack, no absence. Everything is there (Klages,2001). However, as soon as the child begins to speak, s/he comes across absence for the first time because it is the realm of language and according to Lacan "language is always about loss or absence" (quoted in Klages,2001). We need symbols to fill the absence: "you only need words when the object you want is gone" (Klages,2001). So words are symbols for what is not there.

The first lack that a child encounters is the mother's penis, hence the fear of castration. Thus, the infant is separated from the mother. The fear forces the child to renounce the mother and from then on "all pleasures will be substitutive, for sexuality consists of the pursuit of metaphorical alternatives to lost felicities: indeed, desire in Lacan is nothing other than the drive to linguistic substitution" (Ellmann,1994:19). This substitution leads to the concept of otherness. Since language is based on differences in the Saussurian sense, when the infant enters the symbolic order, s/he begins to perceive the world in terms of differences. Therefore, the structure of otherness and the structure of lack

coexist in the symbolic order. Consequently, since the self is always defined in relation to the other, there is the possibility of a never-ending lack.

According to Lacan, "the most important other in the child's life is the mother" (Klages,2001). Therefore, it is when the child realises the mother's lack and experiences the fear of castration that the father becomes an important figure, "a function of the linguistic structure" (Klages,2001). The father becomes the Law that separates the infant from the mother. Thus, when the child discovers the language, s/he discovers the father. S/he enters the symbolic order and becomes a subject. Submission to the rules of the language is submission to the Law of the Father (Klages,2001). Both the symbolic order and the law of the father are patriarchal. It is at this stage that the child recognizes sexual differences: "To achieve subjectivity, the infant has to be conscripted into the lexicon of kinship, in which its identity as a child, son or daughter, is determined by its difference from other subjects" (Ellmann,1994:16).

This theory takes us to the concept of the phallus, which is the best signifier to prove the patriarchal, dominating, hegemonic nature of language. The other, in a Derridian sense, is the center of the system- the center that everyone wishes to reach but cannot because it is the unattainable like the God. As Mary Klages indicates, this center is also called the phallus "to underline even more the patriarchal nature of the symbolic order" (2001). It is the governing principle of the whole structure. It is the signifier of the difference between the sexes and as such it stands "for all the differences that structure the symbolic order" (Ellmann,1994:19). Since it is the center and since all the differences are defined in relation to it, everything related to women is defined with regard to the phallus as well. Therefore, the father and his penis have the central role in the system of language which consequently affects all other systems and discourses: "The phallus is the kingpin in the bowling alley of signification: knock it over, and all the other signs come tumbling down. It takes the place of God as the absolute guarantee of meaning" (Ellmann, 1994, 19).

Hence the patriarchal discourse that subordinates, exploits and abuses women: "As women enter language, learn to name themselves, so they are put in their place within the social order of meaning....There is masculinity and there is its absence" (Morris,1993:113-114). It all starts with defining the self with the mother's lack, and from then on woman is regarded as the one who lacks, who needs to be fulfilled, who needs to be completed. She is the one that is weak and incomplete: "'Man' is always the positive term (the norm) and 'woman' the 'other'" (Morris,1993:115). Language puts women into this position, and since it is the basis of all other systems, women had to change the language:

for women the Symbolic means awareness of the self as a subject constituted through an alien- because logocentric and phallogocentric-discourse, which depends on pre-ordered naming and categorisation. Entry into this state thus destines woman to a position in which she is linguistically marginalised, rendered inactive or mute in speech as well as

in social signification. The only way to overcome this verbal suppression is to speak through a language not dominated by the phallus (Foster,1990:66-67).

Thus, women had to create an alternative language, a language of their own to reestablish their position as women. This is why feminine writing emerged in the first place: "Language, many claim, plays a crucial role in defining and maintaining a 'man's world' while delineating and enclosing 'women's place'. In trying to move beyond that confining place, many women are attending to and changing the verbal realities of their daily lives" (McConnell-Ginet,Burker,& Furman,1980:xi). Women's movement for a new language started with the daily language and reached its peak in literature because through literature it reached a wider audience.

It was impossible for women to raise their voice and talk about their problems, their subordination by men, using the language of men:

Many women writers find the forms and 'the oppressor's language' they've inherited inadequate to their expressive needs. To try to create alternative modes of expression, women are experimenting with new forms of writing and speaking. Language is seen as both problematic and potentially powerful in the development of alternatives to political, aesthetic, and intellectual traditions shaped by and for men (McConnell-Ginet,1980:xi).

Women should use that power by creating a women's language in order to fight against those male traditions. Up to this time, women had been defined and positioned by men through men's language. Therefore, "we have to invent a woman's word. But not 'of' woman, 'about' woman, in the way that man's language speaks 'of' woman. Any woman who wants to use a language that is specifically her own, cannot avoid this extraordinary, urgent task: we must invent woman" (Leclerc,1990:74).

As Luce Irigaray claims, it is a futile endeavour for a woman to try to make her voice heard using the language of the oppressor because she would be using the patriarchal discourse itself. Therefore, she would be imitating men. Irigaray argues that:

Part of the aim of masculine language is to make itself *appear* universal, and she argues that this endeavour to remove obvious male bias and neutralise language not only serves patriarchy's purpose but is also dangerous, since it gives women the *impression* of change. For French feminists like Irigaray, women will only begin to speak *as women* by refusing the current order altogether,since to adopt this order, which exists to express *men's* perceptions, modes of organisation, needs and desires is necessarily to speak *as a man* (Sellers,1991:96).

Furthermore, a female language is absolutely necessary to form a sisterhood, so that women can use a common language which is free of any kind of patriarchal, phallogocentric and logocentric notions. Consequently, they will be able to share their experiences, understand each other and find solutions to their problems:

Irigaray suggests that the function of the new language will be 'to cast phallogocentrism, phallogocriticism, loose', so that it will 'no longer, all by itself, define, circumscribe, circumscribe, the properties of anything and everything'. She insists that precisely for this reason, it is crucial for women to create a language in which to express our sex (Sellers,1991:117).

If we do not do that, Irigaray argues, "we will miss each other and fail ourselves" (quoted in Sellers,1991:116). In order to form a unity, women should speak the same language and more importantly that language should be *their* language, not their oppressor's.

As Leclerc puts it "the whole of feminine literature has been whispered to women in man's language" (1990:75). Therefore, it is high time women raised their voices and deconstructed the patriarchal discourse. Now that we know why feminine writing emerged, we can discuss how it came to happen. The answer is in Kristeva's and Cixous's theories.

What Lacan calls the Real is called the semiotic by Kristeva. It is the preoedipal stage that women should go back to. She distinguishes between the semiotic and the symbolic as follows: "the *symbolic*, dominated by the father, the phallus, and the law; and the *semiotic*, haunted by the vengeful traces of a lost pre-Oedipal maternal world" (quoted in Ellmann,1994:25). What women are interested in is this lost maternal world where there is no phallus, no father, no law. Kristeva argues that language is constituted by his penis and her lack. Therefore, a woman cannot use *that* language to speak *herself*. She must turn back to the semiotic because:

the semiotic...is associated with sonority and rhythm...in which language coalesces with the body and the orchestration of the drives; whereas the symbolic...articulates these primal forces into rational, intelligible forms. Logically and chronologically prior to the institution of the symbolic, the semiotic first makes itself heard in the echolias of infants; and it survives as a pulsional pressure within language, resurfacing wherever the acoustic matter of the signifier threatens to disrupt the sense (Ellmann,1994:25).

We lose touch with the semiotic because the semiotic is repressed when the child enters the symbolic order: "Language is acquired at the expense of repressing instinctual drive-energies and a continuous relation to the mother through holding in check primary (drive-governed) processes which become subordinate to it" (Sellers,1991:98). In the semiotic there is no control whatsoever. Nothing is repressed. It comes out of unrepressed feelings and maternal body: "The father's clearly defined place corresponds to the mother's body as the unrepresentable *chora*- a kind of non-place, symbolically speaking" (Lechte,1990:130).

Women should write from their chora, say feminists. The chora is associated with the mother's body. It is unrepresentable (Lechte,1990). Therefore, women's

language should come from the *chora* which is a place we know from the semiotic but have forgotten when we entered the symbolic. The *chora*, according to Kristeva, precedes everything that is symbolic. It is a place of rhythm and movement:

the *chora*, as rupture and articulations (rhythm), precedes evidence, verisimilitude, spatiality, and temporality. Our discourse- all discourse- moves with and against the *chora* in the sense that it simultaneously depends upon and refuses it. Although the *chora* can be designated and regulated, it can never be definitively posited: as a result, one can situate the *chora* and, if necessary, lend it a topology, but one can never give it axiomatic form (Kristeva, 1984:26).

There is a kind of regulation in the *chora* as well; however, this is not a regulation according to a law as in the symbolic: "The *chora* is a modality of signifi- cation in which the linguistic sign is not yet articulated as the absence of an object and as the distinction between real and symbolic. We emphasize the regulated aspect of the *chora*: its vocal and gestural organization is subject to what we shall call an objective *ordering*" (Kristeva, 1984:26). An order of meaning that is very different from the phallogocentric symbolic order is the basis of feminine writing (Morris, 1993). Thus, *chora* is the place in woman's body that gives birth to her language.

Even if women do not attempt at creating a language that comes from the *chora*, yet sometimes there are eruptions of the semiotic in the symbolic order. These eruptions are mainly poetic such as silences, contradictions, ambiguity, rhythm, music, meaninglessness and deviations from the grammatical rules. Kristeva explains this fact as follows:

the semiotic, which also precedes it [the symbolic], constantly tears it open and this transgression brings about all the various transformations of the signifying practice that are called 'creation'. Whether in the realm of metalanguage (mathematics, for example) or literature, what remodels the symbolic order is always the influx of the semiotic. This is particularly evident in poetic language since, for there to be a transgression of the symbolic, there must be an irruption of the drives in the universal signifying order, that of 'natural' language which binds together the social unit (Kristeva, 1984:62).

Therefore, the symbolic is constantly erupted by the semiotic. It is also present in everyday language; however, in that case it goes without notice because of the communicative function of language. But in literature it becomes obvious through exaggeration (Lechte, 1990). One reason for this is the freedom of poetry from the rules of the symbolic order. Thus, what is repressed can be fully expressed through poetry (Sellers, 1991). That is why literature has a fundamental role in deconstructing the patriarchal language. It enables the writer to disrupt the signifying order freely. As Sellers claims, through the disruptions of the semiotic, poetry "destroys accepted beliefs and traditional modes of signification, preparing the way for revolutionary change" (1991:99).

However, one thing should be taken into consideration: These poetic eruptions have to go through the symbolic order because otherwise they become neurotic, schizophrenic. Similarly, Kristeva suggests that "the forces of the semiotic must be harnessed by those of the symbolic lest they should erupt into a fanaticism of the instincts, such as fascism" (quoted in Ellmann,1994:25). Furthermore, Lacan also "warns us that the price of the denial or 'foreclosure' of the phallus is psychosis" (quoted in Ellmann,1994:19). Therefore, totally abandoning the symbolic and giving oneself solely to the semiotic is as dangerous as it is futile:

Kristeva believes that the desire to return to an imagined semiotic order is a dangerous position for an individual woman, as well as for feminism as a movement. By rejecting the symbolic order which sustains social identity a woman leaves herself unprotected and open to the full force of unconscious desire, of which the most powerful is always the death drive. A desire to return to the mother can become a desire for loss of identity, for a dissolution of self in m/other- for death. Since poetic language is the form discourse most open to the semiotic drive, constructing itself on the threshold of the unconscious with the social, creative aesthetic activity is seen by Kristeva as more risky for women writers than for male writers (Morris,1993:148).

What women should do, then, is to use the semiotic to express their sexuality, their bodies, their experiences within the framework of the symbolic.

Women should write as woman with their own language because authorship has always been ascribed to men and women have been left out: "In patriarchal Western culture, therefore, the text's author is a father, a progenitor, a procreator, an aesthetic patriarch whose pen is an instrument of generative power like his penis" (Gilbert,1979:488). This is exactly why women should write their body. Their bodies are defined as lacking the phallus, the penis, that enables men to father texts. "If the pen is a metaphorical penis, with what organ can females generate texts?" asks Gilbert ironically (1979:489). This is the idea that women should contradict through a feminine language. As Cixous maintains "because logocentrism founds origins in the phallus...life and creative power are constructed as male" (quoted in Morris,1993:118). Women do not need a penis to become authors. After all, writing with a pen(is) would mean speaking through the symbolic. However, that is not what women want. They want to speak through the semiotic, the chora. Therefore they do not need a penis at all.

Being left out of authorship is not the only problem though. Women have also been "subject to (and subjects of) male author-ity" (Gilbert,1979:491). Therefore we need representations *of* women *by* women in literature, and this is only possible through an organised, unified, structured feminine writing. Sandra Gilbert suggests that "against the traditional generative authority of the pen/penis, the literary woman can set the conceptual energy of her own female sexuality" (1979:494). That would be the energy issuing from the chora.

Whereas Gilbert, in her article, explains to her readers how and why women are excluded from literature, and offers solutions (1979), Hélène Cixous, on the other hand, elaborates this solution and informs us on how to write our bodies (1976). Her article is a sort of invitation to all women across the world to create a common language that would do away with the subordinating male language and its limitations to women. Cixous explains thoroughly how this feminine writing would be put into practice. Moreover, the article itself is a very good example of her theory: "instead of the feminine as lack and absence, Cixous's writing practice in 'Medusa', embodies abundance, creative extravagance, playful excess, the physical materiality of the female body" (Morris, 1993:121-122).

Cixous accepts that there has been works of women writers previously but these works were "in no way different from male writing, and which either obscures women or reproduces the classic representations of women" (1976,311). Therefore, women should write as women, not as men. Cixous draws a parallel between the unconscious and the semiotic, and between the repressed and the women. So women can find their selves in the unconscious, in the semiotic. That is why they should turn to their bodies. Because the semiotic manifests itself through women's bodies:

The body is linked to the unconscious. It is not separated from the soul. It is dreamed and spoken. It produces signs. When one speaks, or writes, or sings, one does so from the body. The body feels and expresses joy, anxiety, suffering and sexual pleasure. Sexual pleasure is the least constrained, the least bridled manifestation of the body. 'Feminine' sexual pleasure is overflowing, undecided, decentralised and not caught up in the masculine castration scene, and is not threatened by impotency. The body lets desires pass through and this desire creates images, fantasies and figures. Feminine desire is flowing, so we often find images of the spring, of liquid, of water (Cornell, 1990:39).

Cixous argues that women's bodies have been used, abused, imprisoned and suppressed throughout his(s)tory. By writing their bodies women would take back their bodies, make it their own and make it be heard: "It is by writing, from and toward women, and by taking up the challenge of speech which has been governed by the phallus, that women will confirm women in a place other than that which is reserved in and by the symbolic, that is, in a place other than silence" (1976:312). Through the theories of the patriarchal discourse, women were estranged to their bodies. They were made to believe that their bodies were incomplete, dark and sometimes even filthy. Patriarchy made women repress their femininity and thus turned them into strangers to their own bodies. Cixous, however, tries to tell women that all that is a lie. Women are not castrated. They do not lack anything. They do not need to be fulfilled (1976). Woman's body is open-ended, and her language should also reflect this open-endedness. Writing with her white ink:

her writing can only keep going, without ever inscribing or discerning contours, daring to make these vertiginous crossings of the other(s) ephemeral and passionate sojourns in him, her, them, whom she inhabits

long enough to look at from the point closest to their unconscious from the moment they awaken, to love them at the point closest to their drives; and then further, impregnated through and through with these brief, identificatory embraces, she goes and passes into infinity (Cixous,1976:317).

Cixous also informs her female readers about what to write using this language. She suggests that they should write everything about femininity because nothing has been written about it yet by *women*. They should write about "their sexuality...its infinite and mobile complexity, about their eroticization, sudden turn-ons of a certain miniscule-immense area of their bodies...about trips, crossings, trudges, abrupt and gradual awakenings" (Cixous,1976:315). They should write about their bodies through their bodies.

Moreover, Cixous points at the possible deconstructive and revolutionary effects of feminine writing. She predicts how this female language will destroy the present system and cause an upheaval which will consequently lead to the jouissance of women. She claims that a feminine text is "volcanic; as it is written it brings about an upheaval of the old property crust, carrier of masculine investments...If she's a her-she, it's in order to smash everything, to shatter the framework of institutions, to blow up the law, to break up the 'truth' with laughter. For once she blazes *her* trail in the symbolic, she cannot fail to make of it the chaosmos of the 'personal'" (1976:316).

Thus, feminine writing emerges through women writing their bodies with their white ink. They give way to the semiotic and break apart from the symbolic. The next question then would be how feminine writing functions in the women's movement, how it contributes to women's liberation.

The uses of feminine writing are several. First of all, it introduces women to their bodies. Until then any issue related to women's bodies had been repressed. Now women can talk and read about their bodies explicitly, without disguise. Consequently, feminine writing raises consciousness. When women know themselves and gain consciousness, this leads to their realisation of their subordination, and this in turn leads to a unity, an establishment of a sisterhood. Women can unite within the frame of feminine writing because it provides for them a common language through which they can understand each other. After achieving all these, they can make themselves heard as they are, that is , as women.

V. A. Conley draws a parallel between Cixous's offer of writing our bodies and knowing ourselves. Conley argues that Cixous "replaces the patriarchal 'know thyself' with a call to women to 'write themselves'" (1991:51). Therefore, the process of feminine writing starts with knowing the body and goes on with writing it. Of course, writing the *body* is a challenge, a reaction against the taken-for-granted norms of society because the body has always been concealed and censored. It has never been talked of before. Thus, "contemporary women's

writing often 'displays' the body in ways which challenge its 'careful disguise' by patriarchal culture" (Sellers,1991:111). Feminine writing shows women that their bodies exist independently, that they can be touched, felt, smelled. That is why "writing is an act of liberation from social censorship and personal inhibitions. The poetic text is the privileged place of inscription of the 'feminine' imaginary and unconscious" (Cornell,1990:35).

Since one of the primary aims of feminine writing is to deconstruct the patriarchal ways of conceiving the world, women have to get rid of binary oppositions in language. The main binary is the male/female difference. Therefore, feminine writing should be bisexual, so that it will be decentered in terms of sex. In this respect, feminine writing is open to both sexes because it celebrates "the simultaneous presence of masculinity and femininity within an individual subject" (Shiach,1991:16). The emphasis is on the equality of the two. They are not two halves of a whole but they are a whole in which neither is repressed (Conley,1991). This is expressed by Cixous in her article written with the 'new' language: "I want all. I want all of me with all of him. Why should I deprive myself of a part of us? I want all of us...I do desire the other for the other, whole and entire, male or female" (1976:319). There is no position of mastery in *écriture féminine*. It is an attempt at writing the other without appropriating or annihilating the other's difference so as to become the master (Sellers,1991).

Such a unification, such a reordering of the positions of sexes may have a deconstructive effect on the patriarchal discourse, because poetic language has a revolutionary potential. That is, it shapes and influences people's every kind of relationships with the world as well as their relation to language (Sellers,1991). Feminine writing has the potential of changing the whole system:

For Cixous, the heart of *écriture féminine* is a relinquishing of the (masculine) self, and an acceptance and inclusion of the other in ways which will necessarily call into question the prevailing ideology and its mode of perception and expression, and hence create a new 'order' to replace the patriarchal and capitalist hegemony. Like Julia Kristeva, Cixous sees writing as the locus and means of this revolution (Sellers,1991:139).

Thus, feminine writing, by offering an alternative to the Law of the Father, may bring a revolution, tearing down all the hierarchies caused by this law. There is no mastery, no difference, no single truth in *écriture féminine* (Sellers,1991). It is open-ended and full of possibilities just as our bodies.

Since feminine writing is revolutionary, then it is political as well. Feminine writing causes political transformation because "poetry, like other arts, questions and transforms ideology" (Conley,1991:59). In terms of *écriture féminine* the ideology that is being questioned and transformed is the patriarchal ideology. It is a political act because its motive is the liberation of woman (Shiach,1991).

The reader's role is also equally important in feminine writing, because the reader has to open up her body as well, in order to understand the texts of *écriture féminine* (Sellers, 1990). A feminine reader should realise one thing, just as Sissel Lie did: "I had to give something of myself in the reading, had to read with my head and my body, to mobilise feeling and memories in order to meet her [Cixous's] texts, I could understand what she says and let it change me" (1990, 196). Thus, the reader should be both open to the text, and at the same time they should avoid the impositions of the symbolic order. That is, the feminine reader must open the self "to the meanings of a text, without seeking to impose 'his' preconceptions or desires, or attempting to make sense of the text in order to construct 'his' position as reader" (Sellers, 1991:146).

To conclude, a women's language is needed in order to get united as women and in order to raise our voice against the oppressions of the patriarchy. This language should stem from our bodies. It should be free from all the fixing, subordinating, centering notions of the symbolic order. It should flow like the liquids in our bodies. We should use metaphors that come from the semiotic. Only then will our true selves be put forth. However, feminine writing cannot be described or defined using the terms of the patriarchal language. It should rather be shown by practice as Cixous and Leclerc do in their articles (1976; 1987). Both writers exemplify the theory of *écriture féminine* by writing their bodies: "My body flows with the vast rhythmic pulsation of life. My body experiences a cycle of changes. Its perception of time is cyclical, but never closed or repetitive" (Leclerc, 1987:77). Cixous not only practices feminine writing herself but she also encourages other women to do the same. However, Cixous also suggests that a definition of feminine writing is not possible:

this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded- which doesn't mean that it doesn't exist. But it will always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallogentric system; it does and will take place in areas other than those subordinated to philosophico-theoretical domination. It will be conceived of only by subjects who are breakers of automatisms, by peripheral figures that no authority can ever subjugate (1976:313).

Even if we could define it, still we shouldn't have done so because that would mean to slot feminine writing "into place as a binary opposition to the symbolic" (Morris, 1993:125). Feminine writing is the new language of women. It is political and revolutionary. It is a means of recognising our real identities and communicating to other women. It is our sole weapon to fight against the dominance of men. However, this does not mean that feminine writing is only open to women. Men can practice it as well and in fact they do. Jean Genet whom Cixous also considers as a male writer "who is open to the anarchic force of bisexual desire and hence to pursuing a feminine writing practice" (quoted in Morris, 1993:126) is one good example.

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