

The Utopian Gesture in Feminist Folklinguistics: Attempting the Impossible by Patricia Gillikin

Feminists have critiqued phallogocentric, patriarchal, silencing practices in language, observing and theorizing about how and why men and women use language differently, and how those differences sometimes disadvantage women. These feminists have managed to find ways within traditionally gendered notions of men's and women's language, which many recognize they cannot escape, to defend and promote women and do political work on behalf of women. Some feminists even try to find within "feminine" rhetoric a "new" language free of historical, cultural constraints, i.e. one not tainted by patriarchy, by the inescapable ideologies that work to diminish women. Like a call for a new society untainted by the blind spots and prejudices of the old, this is of course impossible, especially according to prevailing feminist ideologies. Nevertheless, some feminists attempt the impossible, trying to go farther than they can go, in feminist utopias of language.

A Practical Utopia: Non-sexist Language

Casey Miller and Kate Swift, in the traditional language of grammar handbook writers, propose conventional goals for a relationship with language. They write in The Handbook of Nonsexist Language,

The need today, as always, is to be in command of language, not used by it, and so the challenge is to find clear, convincing, graceful ways to say accurately what we wish to say. (Miller and Swift 9)

Their handbook talks about changes that are almost invisible, about the removal of sexist language: once removed, there is not too much need for language "creation" to replace it. With the exception of "Ms.", which was initially jarring but now almost taken for granted, an alternate inclusive construction such as "human-powered flight" for "man-powered flight" eventually does not call attention to itself as a neologism, does not necessarily provoke or frighten.

Yet, even as they emphasize how the guidelines they offer are already becoming part of common usage, what they are talking about as happening does in fact participate in one kind of utopia. Miller and Swift claim positive benefits for a change to non-sexist language: "...something 'magical' does happen whenever people--singly or as a class--begin to sense their potential as fully integrated members of society, and it is this 'magic' that using nonsexist language helps to bring about" (3). Nonsexist language can also, in fact, be productively dangerous: "At a deep level, changes in language are threatening because they signal widespread changes in social mores" (4). And ultimately, for all that it is couched in the matter-of-fact style of a Strunk and White handbook, with lurking assumptions about ideals of clarity and accuracy in evidence, Miller and Swift are in fact making a hugely utopian assumption about language: that it is possible to control it and not be controlled by it (9).

Even so, the practical changes happening in language which they point out, support, historicize, and help to refine are in fact real changes, with real consequences for the way people live their lives. In contrast, the wildly "impractical" utopian creations of Mary Daly, Suzette Haden Elgin, and Helene Cixous are not designed for widespread, everyday usage. Rather, they exist as outrageous ways of provoking awareness about the effects of patriarchal language, of deconstructing patriarchal language and revealing glimpses of a genuine utopia, an impossible, non-existent place.

Breaking Through the Babble/Bubble of Patriarchy: Feminist Language Creation

The feminist utopian impulse to create language, which echoes throughout French feminist thought, is perhaps best articulated by Annie Leclerc:

We have to invent everything anew. Things made by man are not just stupid, deceitful and oppressive. More than anything else, they are sad, sad enough to kill us with boredom and despair.

We have to invent a woman's word. But not "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.

It is crazy, I know. But it is the only thing that keeps me sane. (74)

Leclerc voices feminist desires to escape completely from "things made by man." Significantly, inventing "a woman's word" and inventing "woman" are equated: Leclerc's manifesto-like style assumes that it is through the construction of language that new possibilities for experience (experience untainted by patriarchal "boredom and despair") are made.

Leclerc enacts in her own style the desire to break free from conventional language. The same impulse to create "the new" can be seen not only in writers deliberately experimenting with and describing different kinds of writing which are designated feminine, but also in writers compelled to create new words, new languages that elude patriarchal assumptions.

Ecriture Feminine

In Helene Cixous's dense and stylistically fascinating "Laugh of the Medusa" she calls on women to write, declaring that such writing will be subversive, radical, revolutionary. She links writing to the body, especially to masturbation (comparing it to the self-exploration and self-creation possible with writing) and to pregnancy. Cixous calls for a distinctive feminine writing, one associated with women, and intended to upset patriarchy, but not one technically to be written only by women; she points to James Joyce as one writer who has used the style she is describing.

Helene Cixous's formulation of ecriture feminine is specifically designed to open up possibilities for women. She enacts it---both in the sense of proclaiming and decreeing its existence, and in the sense of acting it out, performing it, in her own writing. But her enactment of ecriture feminine does not entirely escape patriarchal assumptions about women; her exhilarating use of the body to constitute the writing she is promoting reinscribes notions of women as inescapably bodily creatures. Cixous tries to transform what has been denigrated---the female body---into something powerful. In the process, she must use patriarchy for her own ends, must recognize that "since these reflections are taking shape in an area just on the point of being discovered, they necessarily bear the mark of our time---a time during which the new breaks away from the old" (245). Thus, even as she tries to create the radically new, Cixous acknowledges what she creates will be indelibly marked by "our time" and by patriarchy itself.

New Words

Mary Daly, in Gyn/Ecology, bases her radical language creation in the uncovering of information in androcentric dictionaries, in the close examination of patriarchal language. She describes the process she went through in writing Gyn/Ecology:

The fire and focus [of the writing of Gyn/Ecology] were intense, burning away what seemed to be unnecessary words, forcing me to create New Words.

Often the New Words arose as a result of chases through the dictionary, which involved the uncovering of etymologies, definitions, and synonyms, which in turn led to further word-hunts and Dis-coverings. (xix)

Nevertheless, her language about the process of word-creation/writing is utopian, similar to Cixous's talk of "an arid millennial ground to break" and of her project to "foresee the unforeseeable, to create" (245).

There was nothing contrived about this process. I did not sit down and think that this work required a "different style" and then attempt to create it. I simply risked leaping into the process of gynocentric writing, which meant that the work, in a real sense, created itself. (xix)

Daly elaborates on the sort of words she created/discovered/rediscovered:

...the emergence of Hag-related words, as well as such names as Crone, Spinster, Harpy, Fury, and other New Words, was an integral part of the writing process, and when I spoke these aloud to women I was committing Acts of Be-Speaking. I was speaking the words into be-ing. (xx)

Daly seems to allude here to a biblical kind of creation of the new, and yet she names words from patriarchal language that she has "created." Daly thus demonstrates the impossibility and the daring of utopian naming, finding the most powerful feminist language in names formerly used to denigrate women. If she literally invented new names, with no connection to either sounds or meanings familiar to people accustomed to patriarchal language, her words would mean nothing, would have no power. As it is, words such as Crone and Harpy gain their power precisely from her daring and ironic use of them: their negative power is transformed, for some listeners, into the positive and the reaffirming. There is a close analogy to the use lesbians, gays, and bisexuals have made of the word "queer," formerly a derogatory term, now---at least in some queer communities and in some academic circles---a word that opens up multiple possibilities, that succeeds in the rather post-structural and Cixousian goal of dismantling categories, of breaking boundaries.

Importantly, as Mary Daly explains what happens as she Be-spoke New Words into existence, she describes an oral and a collaborative situation---not the stereotypically masculine circumstance of an individual writer struggling alone, but a stereotypically feminine setting of a woman creating community with other women.

Nor was I alone in this process. Wild women heard me into Be-Speaking, and together we were forging a Metalanguage that could break through the silence and the sounds of the phallogocentric babble. (xx)

This is the paradoxical hope of feminist language creation; significantly, she uses images both of making---"forging"---and breaking, recalling Cixous's goal "to break up, to destroy" (245). Her own awareness of impossibility of truly breaking free is present in her emphasis on the partial nature of Gyn/Ecology, on the book as permanently unfinished. "I did not see it as a work of perfection. For some women it could be an Awakening shock, for others a Source of information, or a spring-board from which they might Leap into their own A-mazing Searches, Words, Metaphors" (xxix).

Laadan

Suzette Haden Elgin's Laadan, a created "women's language" which is part of the world of her science fiction novel, Native Tongue, shows through its "Encodings" how languages have hidden, silenced, and ignored certain experiences commonly assigned to women (though such experience has clearly been kept even further from men and the languages they use). The novel provides an explanation for the term "Encodings":

When we women say "Encoding", with a capital "E"...[w]e mean the making of a name for a chunk of the world that so far as we know has never been chosen for naming before in any human language, and that has not just suddenly been made or found or dumped upon your culture. We mean naming a chunk that has been around a long time but has never before impressed anyone as sufficiently important to deserve its own name....there is no way at all to search systematically for capital-E Encodings. They come to you out of nowhere and you realize that you have always

needed them [.] (160)

Unlike Cixous, Elgin focuses not on a different style but on different words, which unlike Daly's New Words, truly are new creations, unrelated to other words in existing languages. Elgin nevertheless echoes both women with her disclaiming of system, her declaration that "they come to you out of nowhere." Words such as radama, "to non-touch, to actively refrain from touching," and radamalh, "to non-touch with evil intent," validate an experience thought of only as a negative, a non act, in currently available language, and therefore not worth mentioning, not worth noticing. Such words would provide a speaker with the power of naming: a word such as dooledosh, "pain or loss which comes as a relief by virtue of ending the anticipation of its coming," could have therapeutic effect, providing a means of understanding a feeling which otherwise might be a cause of guilt. Words in Laadan often name what it is not socially acceptable to talk about but incredibly familiar, such as radiidin, "non-holiday, a time allegedly a holiday but actually so much a burden because of work and preparations that it is a dreaded occasion; especially when there are too many guests and none of them help." This "the king is wearing no clothes" quality of Laadan is also found in rarih, "to deliberately refrain from recording; for example, the failure throughout history to record the accomplishments of women."

Many words in Laadan describe emotions and relationships, such as lowithelaad, "to feel, as if directly, another's pain/grief/surprise/joy/anger," and woshosheni, "a word meaning the opposite of alienation; to feel joined to, part of someone or something without reservation or barriers." Cheris Kramerae and Paula Treichler, in their introduction to A Feminist Dictionary, describe Laadan as "a women's language to incorporate women's concerns" (158). Laadan includes "many words about, for example, the complexities of and feelings toward pregnancy, menstruation, the failure of published histories to record the accomplishments of women, the varieties of love--concepts which exist at present only through lengthy explanations" (158). Laadan does name what is often unnameable in patriarchal cultures. Simultaneously, however, as a women's language, it tends to essentialize women. Patriarchal cultures have often seen men as positive, women as the opposite of or the negative of men; as Cixous would put it, women are defined by lack. Significantly, many of Laadan's words, naming occurrences important to women, are about absence, lack---"non-garden," "non-neighbour," "to non-teach," "non-meta," "non-cup." Naming the lack can provide a kind of power, a means of making known that what is absent should be present. Nevertheless, the identification of women with a language made of so many negatives is troublesome. Moreover, the association of women with relationships and with emotion puts women in a confining patriarchal stereotype, simultaneously keeping men in the opposite confining stereotype. Finally, the experiences Laadan implicitly designates as women's experiences are the ones traditionally designated as women's in a patriarchy: radiidin, "non-holiday," describes vividly the ordeal many women go through in patriarchal cultures without envisioning that perhaps men could also go through the preparations for an occasion, also experience the negative side of a radiidin. Laadan, then, is still caught in patriarchy; its strategies are those of women just on the verge of making someplace new, someplace not even quite imagined yet in Laadan, but which Encodings like those in Laadan could provide the power to realize.

Conclusion

Unlike Miller and Swift's handbook, which merely reifies what is already becoming consensus, creators of feminist and women's languages are not able to construct and describe words and styles that are useable in everyday circumstances, that are transformative because they become the way a majority of people talk and write and think. They remain specialized vocabularies. (This is not the same as saying they are not usable in certain circumstances. For example, in a preface to Gyn/Ecology, Bonnie Mann writes of being able to use that book's terminology and imagery with women who had been battered by their husbands. These women used Daly's language to understand their own situation, finding it freeing.)

Nevertheless, despite their limited use, such language utopias provide a glimpse of the impossible that

helps us become more startlingly aware of the limitations of the patriarchal assumptions in common language use. The attempt to "break outside," to say what cannot be said, what no one has heretofore imagined could be said, is one of the impossible endeavors of feminism. It is only appropriate, then, that some feminists have specifically endeavored to create new language---either through valorizing and re-envisioning an old, recognizable, traditional language assigned to women, as the French feminists do with écriture feminine, or through literal attempts to create the new, to do what has not been done before: Laadan, Mary Daly's Wickedary. The attempts are as doomed to failure as our attempts to know primary orality in terms of literacy, or our attempts, in speculative fiction, to imagine an "alien" society or life form without simultaneously projecting on to it our own cultural biases and norms.

Such attempts are also troublesome in as much as the attempts to make a "new" language for women must so often be dependant on very old ideas about inherent qualities in women and of men. But I would claim that these feminist utopias of language, essentialist as they may sometimes be, nevertheless serve a function; their essentialisms can be seen as "strategic," in Diana Fuss's vocabulary. They are deliberately designed to shake up ideas about our own uses of language, to demonstrate possibilities for language. Like any utopia, they help us see through contrast the faults of our own inescapable world. Specifically, feminist utopias of language help us see dominant, patriarchal languages from a distance, as contingent, help us become aware of patriarchal assumptions in language that shape us. Such awareness is only the first step to the kind of utopias towards which these feminists are striving.

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