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Women Finding Their Voices in the Symbolic Order of American Society

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The aim of this article is to show the struggle of women from various cultural, ethnic, race and sexual backgrounds to find their voices amid the confines of the Symbolic Order of contemporary American society. Through the medium of language, society imposes and perpetuates the roles which its members have to accept and abide by. Due to the fact that the Symbolic Order and language as its articulation are male-centred, they serve to entrap women in roles which define them in accordance with the dominant logocentric concepts. They are forced into mimicry, having to use an alien voice, while theirs is forced into the background, into the "semiotic". The autobiographical works by Maxine Hong Kingston, Audre Lorde and Minnie Bruce Pratt present us with the social, gender, sexual and racial prejudices, struggles and obstacles they had to go through in American society, but also with a powerful set of strategies to find and express their voice and identity in life and literature.

Keywords: American society, Lacan, symbolic order, issues of representation, feminism, women's writing

The world is a highly complex, intricate and structured maze of symbols and rules which determine and order the way we lead our lives. It is a tangled labyrinth, consisting of corridors that have been built long before we were born. These paths are surrounded with walls, constructed by rules, bans, taboos which mark the direction in which the system wants us to be headed. Even though we might not be aware, we thread through this maze every day, trying to follow the right path which has been set for us. We move along those conventional lines, but there is always a nagging feeling at the back of our minds that there is something outside those walls. This disconcerting feeling has permeated the intellectual thought of the 20th century and led to some of the most important ideas and concepts of our contemporary culture. One such advance was achieved in the field of psychoanalysis, mainly through the revolutionary ideas of Sigmund Freud who delved into the then still unknown territory of the unconscious. His findings helped set the scene for most of the prevailing theories which still dominate the landscape of linguistic and literary discourse. One of them was introduced by one of the most influential followers of Freud, Jacques Lacan. It is his theory of the Symbolic Order which informs and serves as a catalyst for much of the theoretical work of the French feminists.

According to Lacan, through the agency of language the place of the subject in the Symbolical Order “is already inscribed at birth, if only by virtue of his proper name” (in Mills at. Al., 1989: 158). In order for the subject to enter the Symbolic Order, it has to suppress certain elements of the Imaginary which are not acceptable or expressible within the discourse of the Symbolic Order. Thus, the identity of the subject is formed. However, this identity and selfhood, according to Lacan is inherently male, which is also confirmed by his claim that the basic law which governs the Symbolic Order and provides its semantic apparatus is the appropriately named Law of the Father. As a consequence of this, following the reading of Lacan by Kristeva, the feminine is distinguished as negativity and all its constituting elements which are not compatible with the male-based Symbolic Order are banished to the realms of the Imaginary. It is in this area of the unconscious which Kristeva calls the “semiotic” where the feminine is located and where it is “*accessible in patriarchal discourse only at the point of contradiction, meaninglessness and silence*” (Mills at. Al., 1989: 157). That is why “a

woman who 'refused' to enter the Symbolic Order through language would remain unsocialised, psychotic and autistic" (Mills at. Al., 1989: 158). All this has led Luce Irigaray to take up a more radical position towards the logocentric and reductive tendencies of Lacan's theory. She calls for rejection of "all great systems of opposition on which our culture is constructed" (Mills at. Al., 1989: 160), because they are instruments of exploitation and negation. Convinced that the feminine cannot be articulated in the existing structure of language, she is advocating the advent of a new language created by writing women which would enable them to express the feminine, an "*écriture féminine*". This new discourse would be fluid and it would decentre and put all fixed meaning into question, thus contributing to redefine and restructure the Symbolic Order.

This was just a short overview of the positions of the two best-known representatives of French Feminism, Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray. Even though this was just a laconic representation of their complex theories, it serves as a sufficient indicator of the obstacles and barriers which women are faced with and which are inherent to the primary and essential component of culture and society – language. The severity of this problem is compounded by the fact that language is the main medium through which all abstract concepts and ideas of culture and society are articulated. Through the medium of language, society imposes and perpetuates the roles which its members have to accept and abide by. Due to the fact that the Symbolic Order and language as its articulation are male-centred, they serve to entrap women in roles which define them in accordance with the dominant logocentric concepts. They are forced into mimicry, having to use an alien voice, while theirs is forced into the background, into the "semiotic". In the following pages, I intend to show the struggle of women from various cultural, ethnic, race and sexual backgrounds to find their voices amid the confines of the Symbolic Order of contemporary American society.

Analysis

The first example comes from *The Woman Warrior* by Maxine Hong Kingston, an autobiographical account of the struggle to find her identity between the two conflicting cultures which mark her life. She is torn between her native Chinese culture and

tradition embodied in her family and the adopted American culture into which she is born. This is best exemplified in the fact that the Chinese character for “I” has seven strokes, and the English character has only three strokes. English, which she is forced to use to construct her identity in the USA, does not allow her to fully express the whole breadth of her identity. It forces her to enclose it into those three meager strokes, which constitute her American identity. Her Chinese identity remains forever hidden, just as is the case with the millions of Chinese immigrants who never give their real names to the authorities. This is also illustrated by the fact that she is silent and withdrawn at her American school, while open and communicative within the confines of the Chinese school and language. The Chinese are also branded with the derogatory expressions such as “gooks”, “chinks”, etc. This shows the repressive characteristics which the official language can have as the embodiment of the official cultural and social system.

Besides the issues that arise from her position as an immigrant, her plight is intensified by the position she has as a woman in the two cultures. Both cultures are patriarchal and both have fixed roles for women which are clearly set out in both languages and cultures. In Chinese culture, a birth of a boy is considered to be a fortuitous event, while the birth of a girl is an unhappy occurrence. There are even cases when the baby girl is killed, abandoned, or even sold in the market. This convention is best epitomized in one of the Chinese words for the female “I” – which also stands for a slave. We can see here a fundamental example of the position assigned to women in patriarchal Chinese society, which has solidified and integrated those concepts and ideas within its ancient myths, stories, philosophies and ultimately within its language. Even Confucius said that a husband may kill a wife who disobeys him. This maxim is best illustrated in the destiny of the author’s aunt in China, she is lynched by the villagers because of adultery and later erased from the memory of her family, pushed into the unconscious, always to lurk behind their words and memories. This repressive influence of her Chinese background is symbolized by the cutting of her tongue by her mother when she was a baby, in order to enable her to speak more fluently, and yet achieving quite the opposite.

The second conflicting influence in her life is American culture, which on first glance provides more liberating and democratic opportunities, but under the surface it is

still deeply rooted in patriarchal misogyny. The appropriate role and vocation for women in the USA is that of a typist. In her social communication, she is forced to take up and invent an American feminine speaking personality in order to be accepted and attractive to the opposite sex. "American-Chinese girls had to whisper to make ourselves American-feminine" (Hong Kingston, 1976: 172). As it can be seen, neither of those languages enables her or provides her with the means to express her femininity and individuality. This is succinctly put in the following sentence: "I push the deformed into my dreams, which are in Chinese, the language of impossible stories" (Hong Kingston, 1976: 87). Her identity is pushed into the realm of the semiotic, from which she is forced to provide the building blocks of her identity. She finds that in the ancient story of Ts'ai Yen, who was captured and lived among barbarians, but who eventually found her voice in songs which echoed in the desert. Following that example, the author finds her voice in writing, ready to find expression of herself and her femininity in literature, to try to redefine and rewrite the Symbolic Order.

Another example of the constraints imposed by language and society can be seen in another autobiographical novel written by Audre Lorde. The title itself *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* indicates the author's need to rewrite and reshape her place within the system which is outlined by the name given to her at birth. This name is not sufficient to encapsulate and express the overall complexity of her subjectivity, in terms of the fact that the system does not allow her to express the whole specter of her gender, ethnic, cultural and sexual background. Her position as a woman in American society is further beleaguered by her Caribbean origin, black skin and most of all, by her homosexual orientation. All these aspects of her identity would ideally serve to enrich and empower her as a person, but the rigid structure of the social order predicated on male Caucasian heterosexual dominance does not allow such complex identities within its economy of expression. Audre Lorde is confronted with this rigidity from her first days at school, when she is even punished for her creativity when she brings homework which is deemed too advanced for her age. Even though she knows how to spell her name, the school, which is the main institution for introduction and perpetuation of the rules, codes and symbols of the predominant society, condemns any such expressions of creativity and individualism if they don't fall within its parameters and standards.

Throughout her life, she has to struggle with the expectations and roles set out by society and this is reflected in the book.

The whole novel is a journey to find her own voice, to construct her own identity. It is a journey of maturation, a rite of passage which takes her through various trials and tribulations. These trials and tribulations shape her thoughts and experiences, starting from the painful introduction into the male world of sexuality through rape, and later through the socially abhorred deed of abortion which comes as a result of a socially frowned upon relationship with a white boy. Later, she has to go through a series of menial jobs which society deems appropriate for the status and education she has attained. Throughout, she strives to find ways to express her sexuality and femininity, in a culture which denounces any forms of sexual expressions that fall outside of the assigned conventions. This journey even takes her outside the borders of the USA, to Mexico, in an attempt to escape and start over in a new environment, in a new culture. However, every society has its own boundaries and rules. Even the gay community, both in Mexico and in the USA, has drawn the lines in the sand which the waves of individuality and self-expression are not to erase. They have also defined the acceptable roles of butch and femme, the accepted game of roleplaying. However, like the broader society they are also strictly divided along racial lines. This prejudice is even formalised and expressed through the derogatory terms used to brand those that dare cross the strict boundaries, calling them AC/DC or Ky-Ky (a term for prostitutes). The whole situation in which the author finds her self in is succinctly described by the following passage:

Downtown in the gay bars I was a closet student and an invisible Black. Uptown at Hunter I was a closet dyke and a general intruder. Maybe four people altogether knew I wrote poetry, and I usually made it pretty easy for them to forget. (Lorde, 1994: 179)

Yet, finding herself in an environment which denies her true expression, she does not buckle. The events, blows and hardships mixed with her various lovers all leave a trace, but they also help her construct her identity. With the help of the catalytic relationship she has with a woman named Afrekette, she is finally able to appease and integrate all

the various aspects of her personality. Through the symbolic rewriting and changing of her name into Zami, she brings together her Caribbean past, her American present and her sexual orientation. “Zami. A Carriacou name for women who work together as friends and lovers” (Lorde, 1994: 225). Zami – a new word which finally encompasses all of her being. Zami - an example of “écriture féminine” which redefines the rigid codes of the Symbolic Order.

The issue of representation and expression within the realms of society and language is most explicitly dealt with in another autobiographical book, *S/HE* by Minnie Bruce Pratt. Throughout the autobiographical short stories and essays that comprise this book, she discusses and argues about the roles in which society, through language, posits us primarily in terms of gender and sexual orientation. In the essay titled “Gender Quiz” she provides the example of the compulsory heterosexual quiz in high school with two possible answers: straight or gay. The answer decides your position in society or as the author so succinctly puts it “one choice would lead us out of the maze into adulthood, the other directly to hell” (Pratt, 1995: 13). The Symbolic Order does not allow for anything that is positioned outside of its boundaries to be represented. The boundaries of heterosexuality strengthen all other social institutions, such as gender, race, class, etc. Everything else which falls outside of those boundaries, as Kristeva argues, is repressed into the “semiotic”, without any form or means of articulation. The author questions the binary forms of representation of gender, masculine and feminine. This issue underlies most of the book, as she often asks: “How many ways are there to have **gender** – from masculine to androgynous to feminine?” (Pratt, 1995: 15). She is bereft of words and ways to express her relationship with another woman who, in her own words, transgresses the boundaries of gender and thus is *transgendered*. The officially sanctioned language doesn’t provide the means for an elaborate examination and understanding of one of the essential components of our identity. During her discussion of the history and development of the feminist movement during her youth, she provides a short, but powerful critique of the established practices of culture and language:

*We carried with us many of the negative assumptions and values that the larger culture had assigned to **woman, feminine, man, masculine** – ideas that served to limit women’s behaviour and to prevent examination of how “masculinity” and “femininity” are not the basis of sex, race and class oppression. (Pratt, 1995: 18)*

This process of deferral of the real meaning is constantly at work in the world, thus diverting the energy and attention of the subjects of the oppression from the methods and effects of their subjugation. They are left to wander in the maze of symbols and meanings which never lead to anything but to the destination preordained by the system. As Minnie Bruce Pratt says in the short story *Rock*: “*I am a woman embedded in the sediment of a culture hardened to stone*” (1995: 43). However, she decides not to remain in that petrified state and proceeds to undertake a revision and redefinition of the practices of repression embedded in culture and language. That is carried out either through the process of mimicry, as defined by Irigaray, embodied in the undermining of the binary opposition of male and female by her lover, or through the rewriting and redefining of language and its terms used for positioning and locating that division. This can be explicitly seen for the title itself *S/HE*, where a process of transformation and recoding of the personal pronouns that define the opposition between the masculine and the feminine is applied. She is trying to formulate a term which would be appropriately expansive and fluid, so as to provide ample space for their fluid identities to be expressed. As part of this process, she is also trying to redefine other terms which sanction the official practices of the patriarchal society such as man, woman, husband, wife, sex, lust. Through the semantic deconstruction of these terms and through the infusion of new meaning into their structure, she is composing and writing the text that would constitute the new discourse of her identity. A new Symbolic Order which would be flexible enough to allow growth and modes of self-expression.

Conclusion

The structures and rules that govern human society very often are invisible to the ordinary gaze and remain hidden under the surface of everyday life. The representatives of French feminism, following upon the work of their male French colleagues Lacan, Derrida, and Foucault, set out to uncover those hidden structures and bare them to the

naked eye. They undertook the immense task to analyze and explain the underlying oppressive processes within society, culture and language which permeate the social interaction between people in general and men and women in particular.

I drew from their work in my analyses of the three books written by American female authors, using Kristeva's concept of the "semiotic" and the radical undertakings of Luce Irigaray directed towards the creation of "*écriture féminine*". These concepts have been of great help in charting and explaining the issues with which the authors were faced and the methods that they used in dealing with their specific literary and empirical problems. The limited scope of this paper only allowed me the space to sketch out certain aspects of their works, but nevertheless it is an adequate starting point to provide an outline of the main characteristics of the issues that we all, but women in particular face in our contemporary society. This is an issue which is yet to be resolved in a satisfactory manner and we all have to strive to further improve the situation. The discussion must never cease.

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