



Écriture Feminine and Its Effects on Literature Reading

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Abstract: The article will briefly introduce the beginning and chronological development of feminist criticism and two forms of it — Anglo-American feminism and French feminism. Then a notion, *écriture féminine*, brought up by Hélène Cixous will be demonstrated and analyzed how it undermines binary oppositions, with a textual example of “The Werewolf”. “Other bisexuality” from Cixous will also be discussed. In the end, there will be some discussion of the defective issues of *écriture féminine*.

Keywords: *Écriture féminine*, Hélène Cixous, feminist criticism

1. Introduction to Anglo-American Feminism and French Feminism

Feminist criticism appeared in the 1960s with the influence of the underway women’s movement. As Peter Barry says in his *Beginning Theory* (2017), “the feminist literary criticism of today is the direct product of the women’s movement of the 1960s” (123). [1] The point of the word “direct” here is that the movement that sought women’s equal salary and division of labor in the workplace stimulated the equality for women in the literary level, because feminist critics revalue women writers and women fiction characters, and challenge the authority of patriarchy. The feminist critics are divided into two groups: Anglo-American feminism and French feminism. The former got its definitive works in the 1970s while the latter got them ten years later and remains active and popular. Anglo-American feminism is a traditional, social and historical criticism, showing strong features like ideologies and practice. Some American representative critics are Elaine Showalter, Sandra Gilbert, and Susan Gubar. However, English feminist criticism is different from American. That is, the English critics are socialist feminists associated with Marxism and cultural materialism. It means that English feminist criticism centers on a broader range like class and gender, which is opposite to American’s emphasis on the analysis of individual texts and the construction of a kind of identity criticism. Representatives like Cora Kaplan and Catherine Belsey respectively belong to two important groups, which are Marxist Feminist Literature Collective and Literature Teaching Politics Collective. Unlike the Anglo-American feminism, French feminism is mainly drawn upon psychoanalysis and post-structuralism aligned with theorists like Derrida, Lacan, and Foucault. French feminists like Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva, and Luce Irigaray focus on how feminism is associated with language and psychology. That is, they shifted to women’s individual experience and psyche.

2. Hélène Cixous’s Concept of *Écriture Féminine*

Based on the unconscious inequality in writing and language, Hélène Cixous believes that “language reveals what she calls patriarchal binary thought, which might be defined as seeing the world in terms of polar opposites, one of which is considered superior to the other” (Tyson 100). [2] Polar opposites are binary oppositions such as night/day, light/darkness, sun/moon, father/mother, which are inaugurated by structuralists. Each pair of words are considered as opposed to one another and “superior to the other”. That is, the latter one is inferior to the former one because the quality of the latter word is feminine, and the former is masculine. From a patriarchal perspective, the feminine side is suppressive, weak, emotional, passive and so forth. On the contrary, the masculine side is dominant, strong, rational, and positive, which is related to Phallogocentrism in which men are put in the central, privileged place of words and languages. As for language, one assumption is whether there exists a form of feminine language for women’s use. Virginia Woolf shows her opinion in her *A Room of One’s Own*, “It is fatal for any one who writes to think of their sex. It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly” (104). [3] In other words, she believes that when people write, they should not think about their sex or they just consider one side. For example, if she is a woman, she must not merely write from the perspective of woman and only write for women, instead, she must be “woman-manly”. That is to say, women should find a medium way to write with the combination of femininity and masculinity. Barry quotes Woolf’s critics, “language use is gendered, so that when a woman turns to novel writing she finds that there is ‘no common sentence ready for her use’” (Barry 128). That is, she agrees with the existence of men’s language resulting in a woman’s inability of writing by her own language. Following

the word “fatal”, she stresses in the book that “Some collaboration has to take place in the mind between the woman and the man before the art of creation can be accomplished” (Woolf 104), and “[t]here must be freedom and there must be peace” (104). In other words, again, she thinks that women and men should throw away the bias of sex when they create arts, and getting rid of the restraint of a singular way of thinking and writing is part of “freedom”. She calls for the writing without bias, which undermines the binary oppositions. It means that women and men must be equal when they use language, and there is no language superior because it is written by a man or in men’s language and vice versa.

Therefore, Hélène Cixous put forward the assumption of *écriture féminine*, feminine writing. She hypothesizes that there is a form of language oriented towards women. Similar to Woolf’s opinion, for Cixous, a woman’s sentence is “the free play of meanings within the framework of loosened grammatical structures” (Barry 129), rather than a man’s sentence that is “carefully balanced and patterned” (Barry 128). That is, when women write, they are more spontaneous and pay more attention to their inner feelings, and they make more natural clauses and sentences instead of well balanced and structured sentences. For how to celebrate in the form of feminine writing, she says that “Woman must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes” (Cixous, 253). [4] Woolf’s opinion is that “[I]t is fatal for any one who writes to think of their sex” (104), in which “sex” refers to biology. However, Cixous’s opinion is opposite to that, as she thinks “woman must write through their bodies” (253), and here the word “bodies” is also aligned with the word “sex”. Based on the premise of sexual difference, she aims at creating a new language for women to construct, to think about and to write about women issues. This language is invented by women without the biased social norms and written for herself and an equal society. As the pioneer of feminine writing, Cixous does not seek for the equality in the system of binary oppositions nor create a system or structure for feminine writing because she thinks that it is impossible for women to join in and become a part of the patriarchy, but she suggests that “as the source of life, women are themselves the source of power, of energy” (Tyson 100). It implies that that in a male-dominant society, women need to resist patriarchal ideas to get equal status and opportunities. That is why feminine writing is not dependent on the traditional binary modes but jumps out of the circle which was set by the patriarchal society where women could not write freely as women. As Tyson says, “[w]e therefore need a new, feminine language that undermines or eliminates the patriarchal binary thinking that oppresses and silences women” (100). Cixous’s posit of feminine writing strongly subverts the binary oppositions in language because it is not decided by sex. She even suggests that some men’s writing also has a quality of femininity. For example, in “The Laugh of the Medusa” (1976), she enjoys and praises French male writer, Jean Genêt, for him “[not] afraid of femininity” (885) in his *Pompes funèbres* (1948). [5] She aligns two French female writers, Colette and Marguerite Duras with Jean Genêt as the only writers who were equipped with femininity in their writing in the twentieth century.

3. Feminine Writing in Angela Carter’s “The Werewolf”

When it comes to the discussion of literature, feminine writing not only gives more free space for writers, no matter they are women or men, but also creates more threads for readers to explore. Take Angela Carter’s “The Werewolf” [6] as an example, it is not a traditional folk tale if it is read from the perspective of feminist criticism. Carter writes in her own feminine way, breaking the usual expectation from readers for the plots and creating a brave, powerful, rational, and even a bit manly woman image. She rhetorically uses the werewolf and the child to symbolize the man and the woman. In her story, the relations between men and women under the power of patriarchy are reversed. That is, the man is no longer the dominant party while the woman is charged and restrained by this power. Instead, the woman sees through the trap set by the man and happily lives on her own in the end. If Carter’s work is connected with Cixous’s feminine writing, Carter does not follow the conventional phallogocentric thread, so that the story effectively mixes both femininity and masculinity in both genders. It is read that the heroin takes on traits from men like wisely knowing how to use a knife and bravely fighting against a wolf. Rather than considering the traits mentioned as men’s exclusive qualities, it is more equal to stand in an objective and neutral position where those traits are also possible to happen to women. Binary oppositions cannot be found in “The Werewolf” when Carter spontaneously writes about and writes for women through her body.

4. Implications and Limitations of Feminine Writing

The break of patriarchal binary ideology and the posit of feminine writing deconstruct and reconstruct the way of thinking about language. Since there is no restraint for women to use what kind of language that they are supposed to use, a kind of “other bisexuality” is born. As Cixous defines, “Bisexuality: that is, each one’s location in self (*reperage en soi*) of the presence-variously manifest and insistent according to each person, male or female-of both sexes, nonexclusion either of the difference or of one sex, and, from this “self-permission,” multiplication of the effects of the inscription of desire, over all

parts of my body and the other body” (884). In other words, depending on different people’s qualities, the essence of both sexes can exist in everyone including men and women. Cixous rejects the classic conception of bisexuality because it comes from men’s fear of castration for defending men’s honor. And due to some reasons for history and cultures, men intend to deny and resist their “glorious phallic monosexuality” (Cixous 884). For women, they have no castration complex, hence more easily accepting the bisexuality. This new bisexual benefits women for writing.

Nevertheless, there are limitations to feminine writing. At the beginning of “The Laugh of the Medusa”, Cixous encourages that “[w]oman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies” (875). It means that feminine writing is based on two aspects of language and bodies. She abandons the notion of gender which refers to society and cultures, so that feminine writing is limited to the realm of body. Different from gender, body is relevance to biology. Hence, this pure feminine writing produces a kind of essentialism. Barry describes that “[s]uch ‘essentialism is difficult to square with feminism which emphasizes femininity as a social construct, not a given entity which is somehow just mysteriously ‘there’” (130). That is, the grain of Cixous’s feminine writing goes against the emphasis of conventional feminism, which leads her notion equivalent to specific female writing that is essentially feminine. Without the construction of social and cultural effects, it makes her assumptions stuck in a utopian level in which it merely extends to language and bodies. That is why she cannot properly set a definition for feminine writing, as she says that “[i]t is impossible to define a feminine practice of writing” (Cixous 883). Thus, it would be ideal and biased for readers to find out the inequality between sexes in texts if it lacks the association with social and cultural conditions.

5. Conclusion

All in all, Cixous’s feminine writing and other bisexuality bring the feminist criticism profound progress since it calls for women to write, to use the pen as a weapon against patriarchy. Writing through bodies produces other bisexuality, which weakens the boundary of sexes and breaks through the phallogocentrism.

References

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