

Writing War and Feminine Discourse

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Abstract

The main aim of this paper is to prove that feministic discourse related to war, is the best example that there is still enough space for debates whether it is necessary to separate feminine writing from “traditional/masculine style“ and that the feminist critique of a language is absolutely necessary segment of contemporary discourse analysis.

Feminine writing is the term presented by French philosopher and writer, Helene Cixous who claims that women write/rewrite signs inscribed in their bodies, but she also explains that this style is not reserved exclusively for women, that men can also write feminine.

Following above mentioned theory, this paper is using writing styles of two Bosnian artists, one writer and one film director, who both described the most painful and violent stories using non-violent language, and who managed to show the reality of war perceived by woman without using any aggressive or offensive discourse.

Even though I do believe that there is no such thing as essential womanhood, common to all women repressed by patriarchy, the aim of this paper is show that feministic war discourse is exactly the place where class, origin, race and all other differences, are utterly minimized among all women around the world.

Introduction - Feminist Critique of a Language

Ever since Simone DE Beauvoir’s “Second Sex” appeared, nothing remained the same in this world, especially not the prism of understanding feminine voices. The ink became white or no! It has finally been perceived as white, since it’s obvious that for example V. Woolf lived long before 1949. as well as many other great female writers. The milestone in understanding feminine writing came with the new generation of poststructuralist philosophers and theoreticians like Lucy Irigary, Julia Cristeva and Helene Cixous. 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.

In order to understand why and how feminine writing emerged, it is essential to have the knowledge of the patriarchal language system and its hegemonic power. One has to have a clear idea of the use of language as a weapon for political aims, particularly 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 discourse affected by gender. Because in the patriarchal culture the most privileged symbol of *signifier* is phallus, the order of language is masculine order dominated by phallus; hence those who do not possess the phallus – women – remain marginal to language. It is from these ideas where Irigary’s isomorphism with masculine sex gain its significance. (Cameron, 1990) 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’ revolutionary argument on writing the body. (Peksen, 2005)

To start from the beginning, I must explain the stage Lacan calls Real. This is a stage that infant goes through before he/she enters the language. The Real is important since this is the stage where no law exists i.e. no domination, no patriarchal is present. In terms of the language this phase is important since it is the phase where woman should go back to find her language.

Real is also important since it is the phase where there is no language. In this case there is no luck, no absence. (Klages, 2001) Helene Cixous takes up where Lacan left off, in noting that women and men enter into the Symbolic Order, into language as structure, in different ways or through different doors and that the subject position open to either sex within the symbolic orders are also different. She understands that Lacan’s naming the

center of the Symbolic as the Phallus highlights what a patriarchal System language is – or more specifically, what phallo(go)centric system is. (Klages, 1997) This word phallogocentric is a coin word stemming from the idea that the structure of language is centred by the phallus. Later Jacques Derrida came with the idea that spoken words are privileged over written ones and he coined the term “logocentric”. Cixous and Irigary combine two ideas to describe Western cultural systems and structures as “phallogocentric” (Klages, 1997) based on the primacy of certain terms in an array of binary oppositions. Thus phallogocentric culture is one which is structured by binary oppositions – male/female, order/chaos, language/science, presence/absence, speech/writing, light/dark, etc and in which the term is valued over the second term (cf De Saussure)

Cixous follows Lacan’s psychoanalytical paradigm which argues that a child must separate from its mother’s body (the Real) in order to enter the symbolic. Because of this, Cixous says, the female body in general becomes unrepresentable in language; it’s what cannot be spoken or written in phallogocentric Symbolic order. Cixous makes a leap from maternal body to female body. Rewriting Freud via Lacan, Cixous conceded that there is no such thing as female sexuality in and of itself in this phallogocentric system – it’s always sexuality defined by the presence of a penis, and not by anything intrinsic to the female body (Klages, 1997).

Cixous and other poststructuralist theoretical feminists are both outraged and intrigued by these possibilities for relation between gender and writing (or language use in general) that Lacan’s paradigm opens up.

Position of men and women in the Symbolic

Lacan’s description of the Symbolic (two doors) places women and men in different positions within the Symbolic in relation to the Phallus; men more easily misperceive themselves as having the Phallus, as being closer to it, whereas women (because they have no penises) are further from that center. Because of that distance from phallus, the poststructuralist theoretical feminists argue, women are closer to margins of the symbolic order; they are not as firmly anchored or fixed in a place as men are; they are closer to Imaginary, to images and fantasies, and further from the idea of absolute fixed and stable meaning than men are. (Klages, 1997)

Because women are less fixed in the Symbolic than men, women- and their language- are more fluid, more flowing, and more unstable than men. It is important here to note that when Cixous talks about women and woman here, sometimes she means it literally, as the physical beings with vaginas and breasts etc. and sometimes she means it as a linguistic structural position “woman” is a signifier in the chain of signifiers within the symbolic just as “man” is; both have stable meaning because both are locked in place; anchored, by the Phallus as center of the symbolic order. When Cixous says that woman is more slippery, less fixed than men, she means both the literal woman and, the person, and the “signifier” woman. (Klages, 1997).

Again when she says “woman must write herself” she is explaining this on two levels. One meaning is that woman must write her own stories her own experience, signs inscribed in her body, i.e. she must retell her experience, but she also must have a (new) way to be connected to the signifier “I” to write the signifier of selfhood/subjecthood offered within the Symbolic order (Klages, 1997)

Cixous argues that most women do write and speak but that they do so “from the masculine position”. In order to speak women have assumed they needed a stable, fixed system of meaning, and thus aligned themselves with the Phallus. Cixous further argues that there has been little or no “feminine” writing (The Laugh of Medusa p. 311)

Further on, Cixous notes that writing is always marked with a Symbolic order that is structured through binary opposites including “masculine/feminine”, in which feminine is always repressed. So she argues that only women can produce feminine writing because it must come from their bodies but she is also arguing that men could occupy a structural position from which they can produce feminine writing.

Feminine writing will show the structure of the Symbolic as a structure not as inevitable order and thus will allow us to deconstruct that order. (Klages, 1997).

On the second level, when women speak/write their own bodies, the structure of the language itself will change, as women become active subjects not just being passively acted upon, their position in language will shift. Women who write, if they do not merely reproduce phallogocentric system of stable ordered meaning which already exists (and which excludes them) – will be creating a new signifying system; this system that may have built into it fare more play, more fluidity, than the existing phallogocentric symbolic order. (The laugh of Medusa p. 319)

Cixous is comparing *écriture féminine* with mother’s milk, with rhythm and song, with pulse but not with representational language.

To define something is to pin it down, to anchor it, to limit it, to put it in its place within a stable system or structure- and Cixous says that feminine writing is too fluid for that. (Klages, 1997).

Feminine writing, than, is *outside of the structure* but to different degrees depending on which theorist we read. Irigary speaks of a language in which the masculine structure has entirely broke down; another writer in the psychoanalytic tradition, Julia Kristeva, talks about pre-symbolic features ‘disrupting’ discourse, producing the oddness and fragmentation typical for modernist and symbolist poetry. Some women, including Woolf are

particularly concerned with expressing in their language a less linear conception of time and space. (Cameron, 1990) Space is important here in terms of 'nations', imagined communities that always imply 'common space-territory' they share (cf Nira Yuval Davis). But feminine writing done by either sex is progressive because it challenges certain myths (rationality, unity) that are essentially patriarchal. And this very challenge of the patriarchal discourse is so important characteristic of Bazdulj's novel "Kad je bio juli" where she has, in the most direct way 'undermined' (challenged) myths of nation, unity, revenge, history etc.

Nation – The myth of nation called into question

We should keep in mind that the nature of all wars has drastically changed recently. For example during the 1st world war although civilians were suffering, still the main battlefield were not close to civilian's homes. The stereotype of that war was a male figure fighting under a flag for the honour of nation for *womenandchildren* (Yuval-Davis). With the 2nd world war the situation has already started to change, while on the example of wars in Balkans, Ruanda, Iraq, Ireland..., we can see that civilians are at the first front lines and the most directly involved in wars. Women are asked to preserve the society in which they usually have no voice. But in Bosnian/Serbian /Croatian language it is especially interesting to analyze a word *Rod* which has the meanings like: gender, family, production... It is a stem of words: *Porod* and further on *Narod* that is a kind of synonym for *Nation*. This relationship reflects the importance of women's procreative roles, especially emphasised during wars since this is the time of great repatriarchalization. In this circumstances women are being glorified all the time but not as subjects who perceive wars from their perspectives but rather as objects, symbols of nation, imagined community that is difficult even to define, since as Nira Yuval-Davis wrote, some of these defining characteristic sometimes look like a shopping list. So while women's writing on war is still not so abundant in Balkans, more and more writers and film directors occupy female position in their writings, escaping phallogocentric, anchored stories as a part of their efforts to present the whole absurdity of wars.³⁶⁸

Despite the obvious differences in their fictional representations of women's wartime experience, works of Zbanic and Bazdulj reveal almost uncanny resemblance, resemblance that seems to set them apart from the wartime memories and perspectives of "mankind". Both authoresses' works concentrate on the moments of suffering and both of them question the purpose of war through the examples of what is so often called "collateral damage"³⁶⁹.

This might serve to distinguish them from masculine war memories, which tend to emphasize actions that led to the ultimate victory. My greatest inspiration for this study was a fact that Ms. Zbanic made a film about rape without a single scene of sexual intercourse. She managed to hold spectators awareness of the whole horror of the war and rape, to represent trauma using completely unaggressive language, free of hatred and heavy myths of past, which represent the trigger of all wars at this planet. **Grbavica** consciously ignores the past, choosing to show Esma moving through her everyday life rather than examining her time in a prisoner of war camp or depicting the multiple gang rapes she suffered. Instead of constantly retelling the past, Zbanic focuses on "Esma's struggle to exist in the present."

Rather than being a personal, narrative account of something completed in the past, this "memory-knowledge" is not locatable in time or easily narrated. Instead, it is felt as a constant presence that shapes current events and how the survivor experiences them. (Gold, 2010.) As Cixous suggested, there are signs that are inscribed and must be retold but the language used in the whole film suggests that Esma tells her story without full agency in her expression. There is a certain dose of pain and trouble which shows that behind all these painful realities, that produced many victimized identities, there is still a woman, the final winner of all wars and battles, still ready to carry on in non-aggressive way without seeking for revenge.

Through the idea of accepting a child of her rapper and looking to the future Esma is denying the importance of blood relationship, so often mentioned as a basic myth in building nations and one of the most common motives for starting and conducting wars or aggressions. Once again mother's love is the absolute winner.

At the same time Bazdulj-Hubijar is writing about the biggest genocide in Europe after the 2nd WW from a perspective of ten-years old boy who lost his parents and baby sister but still believes that his father is somewhere alive. At the first glance it is obvious that the language of this novel is different. Bazdulj is using minor, vernacular language, that introduces one new dimension and separates this novel from classic novels written in established language of literature. Her writing style also implies a certain political dimension, also and as Cixous explains women who write, if they do not merely reproduce phallogocentric system of stable ordered meaning which already exists (and which excludes them) – will be creating a new signifying system; this system that may have built into it fare more play, more fluidity, then the existing phallogocentric symbolic order. So the narrator of "Juli"³⁶⁹ is Mirza, who has lost everything in the war and the only worthy possession he still owns, and

³⁶⁸ Ex. „Trench as a trench they are all the same“ a famous end sentence from *No Man's Land*; oscar-winner film by Danis Tanovic

³⁶⁹ The novel *Kad je bio juli* soon became famous as *Juli*

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which nobody can take away from him is his enormous honesty that remains his biggest fortune gained in his parent's home. By the end of the novel Mirzas' honesty serves as a light motive to oppose all other human evils like greed, lies, selfishness... There is also hope that Mirza will, one day, go back to his parent's house, their own Citadel³⁷⁰

At the end of novel Mirza realizes that all his family is dead and he stops hoping, but they still live in his memories. By this time Mirza is already young man and authoress soothes his pain by introducing a girl Biljana that Mirza falls in love with since she is very young woman. It is interesting that Biljana is Serbian, (Bosnian?) who had spent the war at the territory under control of aggressor's forces but who has also lost her brother in Bosnian army. The whole novel has this dimension of absurdity, and in character of Biljana, Bazdulj reflects famous sentence of Virginia Woolf "As a woman I have no country..." since Biljana cannot be identified as a person who has only one national identity.

Through the whole novel authoress does not question the role of aggressor neither she is neutral.

*"U ovom ratu su četnici bili morebit još gori od onije onda. Da su samo uradili ono što su moje oči videle to je da bog sačuva i zakloni a njija babo u bosni i dan danile ima i ne srame se i ne stide neg se diče tijem i vazda na vas avaz govore mi smo četnici i borimo se za svoju otadžbinu majku srbiju i vas srpski narod. I na vrh vlasti ima jedan predsjednik pa da vidiš kako mu se oči zacakle kad na televizoru priča da mu je čaća bijo četnik u onome ratu, a bezbeli je i on u ovom (...) I još ne znam babo kako je nekome ono što je za vas bijeli svijet bruka i sramota za nekoga dika i ne znam više ništa pa više ništa"*³⁷¹

In this war chetniks are even worse than in he previous one (2nd ww)...

That is why it surprises even more, when in the end of her novel Bazdulj celebrates the idea of *fraternity and unity* that was crucial during fifty years of communism in Balkans. But this is not the only part of the novel that questions the myth of nation. There is another part where authoress explicitly writes that human suffering has no nation, because now, after the war three similar things happened to three persons of different nationalities; just in May 2005. Three men poured gas on themselves and burned themselves to the death and what is even more strange:

"jedan se spalio u Sarajevu bio musliman jedan u Banjoj Luci bio Srbin, a treći u Mostaru bio Hrvat. A more biti da su sve dok se nijesu polili jedan na drugog poprijeko gledali, a mučile ih iste muke"
One of them was a Muslim and had lived and burned himself in Sarajevo, one had lived in Banja Luka and was Serb and one had lived in Mostar and was Croatian. And it is possible that they were looking at each other as enemies but they had shared the same sufferings.

I had read Bazdulj's novels before and I always had the impression that she intentionally levels some dilemmas for reader, but this time I was shocked. At first I could not understand what was the authoress trying to suggest. But the answer to this question I have found in the interview that Kathleen O'Grady made with Helene Cixous. Even in this way, cut out from the context, this sentence explains why only woman could write a novel like *Kad je bio Juli* and why the novel ends up this way:

*Literature is a transnational country. The authors we read have always been the citizens of the other world, border-crossers and out-laws*³⁷²

Both authoresses, Zbanic and Bazdulj showed that there is no the ultimate victory as well as there is no unique definition of the war purpose.

Conclusion

Feminine writing and feminine war discourse is the best example that one text cannot be essentialized, that a text has not only one meaning and that there are so many messages one text can comply. It has been clear for a long time that there is a 'gendered' side of reading and inseparable writing. Examination method of sexual difference in the literary text is deconstruction by Jacques Derrida. Deconstruction, of course, is not destruction. The act of deconstruction is going on in two directions simultaneously, certain entities are decomposed in order to create/compose new ones. Deconstruction is not ruining author's ideas but rather enabling a reader to escape rough meaning of binary oppositions (that are hierarchized in its nature) and is providing a new, enriched way of reading. Binary opposition male/female is structuralistic and essentialistic one in its nature since it assumes an

³⁷⁰ *Citadel* by Mesha Selimovic is a novel that symbolizes unity and protection that a human finds within its family, marriage, love...

³⁷² GUARDIAN OF LANGUAGE: *An Interview with Hélène Cixous* (March 1996) by Kathleen O'Grady Trinity College, University of Cambridge

option that between these two terms, among which one is always privileged in relation to another, and where a signifier is always superior to a signified, there are terms that cannot be expressed through these two signs.

Escaping to both essentialistic and structuralistic nature of language, Bazdulj and Zbanic showed that under a rough surface of war aggressive discourse, there is endless richness of language, stories still to be told and heard, signs inscribed to be rewritten... that are common to all people all over the world regardless of colour, nation, race, place etc.

Feminine war discourse might actually be the closest point where we should search for essential womanhood and the meaning of patriarchal oppression.

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