

parler femme: Assessing Women's Writing through the Lens of Feminist Literary Theory

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ABSTRACT

In the later half of the 20th century, literary theories became more scientific and inclusive. Questions about women's writings and women's language are explored, contested and examined by various prominent critical thinkers. Critics like Butler, Showalter, Cixous, Irigaray contested the idea of feminist language and aesthetics. The question of gender and language became more complicated. All these contestations are also reflected in literature written by women. The present paper attempts to read select women's writings through the lens of feminist literary theories. By exploring women's writings in the context of theoretical frameworks provided by these thinkers, the paper tries to establish an argument that women writers have developed their own aesthetics over a period of time.

Keywords: *chora, ecriture feminine, gender, parler femme.*

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Men and women use different languages or use the language differently? Many feminists over the ages have asserted the existence of a distinct language of women. There have been literary debates over whether gender can be traced in language. Helene Cixous in her essay, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', introduced the term '*écriture feminine*' which Fiona Tolan refers to as a

"...uniquely feminine style of writing characterised by disruptions in the text; gaps, silences, puns, rhythms and new images all signal *écriture feminine*. It is eccentric, incomprehensible, and inconsistent..."

The difficulty to understand it is attributed to centuries of suppression of the female voice, which now speaks in a borrowed language. The female language is regarded to have genesis at a stage of mother-child bond that precedes the attainment of androcentric verbal-language. This 'pre-linguistic and unconscious potentiality' is exhibited in writings that defy repressions, reverse meanings, disregard the male-centric language and invests improvised, unrestricted meanings in the text.

Irigaray terms this female writing '*parler femme*' or 'womanspeak.' It evades male monopoly, threatens patriarchy and allows novel creativity in women. Drawing a parallel between a woman's writing and her body, she asserts that women's writing is as diverse and diffused as her sexual experience- '*jouissance*' unlike men's unitary, phallic pleasure.

"woman has sex organs just about everywhere...feminine language is more diffusive than its 'masculine counterpart'. That is undoubtedly the reason...her language...goes off in all directions and...he is unable to discern the coherence."

Irigaray's research asserts that men and women have specific speech patterns and women usually elude the subject position in language used by both the sexes. Both French and English languages are not exempted from sexism-she discusses the dominance of

the masculine in both the plural and the neuter. Irigaray argues that all objects of merit/ power/ strength such as the sun or God, are vested with masculine gender while the less important objects are designated as feminine. Irigaray asserts that the "I" and the "you" denote subjectivity and women must learn to fill these subject positions in language.

Julia Kristeva coined the term 'chora' which has its roots in what Freud terms as pre-Oedipal and Lacan terms as pre-mirror stage. It is the unsystematic language associated with the mother, which she calls the "semiotic." It is muted on acquiring 'the father-controlled syntactically ordered, logical language' - the "symbolic". Augustine Perumalil while elaborating Kristeva's concept remarks that semiotic is "an emotional field, tied to the instincts, which dwells in the fissures and prosody of language rather than in the denotative meanings of words." According to Birgit Schippers,

"The semiotic is a realm associated with the musical, the poetic, the rhythmic, and that which lacks structure and meaning. It is closely tied to the "feminine", and represents the undifferentiated state of the pre-Mirror Stage infant."

The semiotic language refutes the order and rationality of the acceptable masculine language which roots from the symbolic. The authoritarian subject is disrupted and allows chaos to replace order. The symbolic is linear and realistic and assigns marginality to women. Kristeva asserts that the subject can revert to the semiotic even after stepping into the symbolic. The truth behind a women's sustained connection with the semiotic lies in the continuous identification of the girl child with the mother.

Elaine Showalter analyses if men and women use language differently while creating texts. It studies if factors like biology, social preferences and cultural beliefs could affect the language of a gender. Showalter borrows a diagrammatic representation from anthropologists Shirley and Edwin Ardener to explain the theory of women's culture. Ardener uses two circles that intersect. The two circles depict men's and women's culture. The intersecting section represents the zone of common experiences that men and women share. The remaining crescent shapes refer to exclusive men's and women's culture.

Historically women have been the muted (or silenced) group and men the dominant group. The acceptable language is the one that is of the dominant group and the muted group is bound to use the borrowed language. The crescent that does not form a part of the intersecting circle reflects the experiences of women which have remained unexpressed in history. Men thus, have remained oblivious to their emotions, thoughts and activities. Showalter terms this 'female zone' as 'wild zone' since it is beyond the ambit of the dominant group. Exclusive expression of wild zone experiences is unacceptable. Thus women's writing is a mix of the dominant and the wild zone experiences, feelings and language. Showalter points out the use of 'oppressor's language' for domination of women. The differences in male and female speech in terms of speech, intonation and language use are the most obvious examples of difference in man's and woman's language.

Robin Lakoff's analysis of how these differences in language of genders look like, brings to light the fact that though they might speak the same language/dialect, but still the style will differ. Women's language reflects their specific characteristics: emotional, sensitive, sociable, etc. Men's language signifies their status- dominance and freedom etc. Women are generally thought to be more polite as compared to men. Language politeness can be gauged from the use of terms of compromise, terms that weaken or soften the utterances and make it sound more gentle. Verbal fillers, also termed as 'pragmatic particle' viz. 'I think', 'basically', 'actually', 'of course' are linguistic features that are characteristic of women's language and highlight their politeness. Use of question tags are also marker of women's speech. They signify politeness as well as their desire to get the approval/appreciation of the listener.

The above theories establish the existence of a separate women's language. Judging women's language and women's texts through androcentric literary theories surely is incorrect. I designate literary theories as 'androcentric' since the body of texts on which rests the insights of almost all theories (poetics, psychoanalysis, stylistics, narratology) has not taken gender into consideration to designate a canon or to formulate hypothesis. Thus, the texts that have been the base for the understanding of these theories have been men's text that have been wrongly considered universal or gender neuter so far. Aristotle based his 'Poetics' on the study of canonical texts by Greek male dramatists, Gerrard Genette based his work 'Discours du recit' on Proust's works, Wolfgang Iser's work has male novelists from Bunyan to Beckett as the basis, Freud's 'psychoanalysis' is more or less male oriented, Roland Barthes formulated his theory on Balzac's 'Sarazine', Todorov based his study on 'Decameron'. Thus, a separate canon of literary theories with feminist perspective must be brought to judge women's language and women's texts. Susan Lanser's feminist narratology, Sara Mills' feminist stylistics can be utilized for analysing the 'difference or specificity of women's writing.'

The field of feminist narratology is based on the shared belief that sex, gender, and sexuality are of great significance not only to interpretation and reader reception but to textual poetics itself and thus influence the structures, representational techniques and communicative contexts of narrative texts. Feminist narratology marks a significant departure of value from classical narrative theory by positing narratological importance to these factors determining social position. It ushered in what is now termed as 'postclassical' narratology which lays emphasis on historical and social contexts that shape narratives.

Susan Lanser analysed the structuralist narratology through the lens of gender, reinterpreting the narratological structures from feminist viewpoint. In her essay *Toward a Feminist Narratology*, she points out the grave mistake of considering 'masculine texts' as 'universal texts' (612). She posits that gender perspective might not induce any change in some elements of narrative- the passage of time, but useful contributions can be made if three elements viz. voice, context and plot are reassessed through the lens of feminism. Lanser seeks to co-relate cultural, sociological influences that find their way to the text through the gendered writer. She insists on the interpretation of the structural features of the narratives from the perspective of gender. The focus should be to undertake deeper analysis of the gendering processes that have an impact on different narrative structures. The social, cultural and historical impacts shape a literary text unconsciously. This fact allows a contextualised analysis of the select texts.

Assessing the narrative technique of Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*, she uses two different styles of writing reflected in the two separate narratives; one in third person limited and the other in first person. Ali uses third person limited point of view to reveal Nazneen's story to the reader and Haseena's story is narrated skillfully in the first person through letters that she writes to her sister in London. Hiddleston suggests that

...flickering in and out of Nazneen's thoughts [...], Ali tentatively endeavours to 'give voice' to her character, but she also uses her narrator as a frame. She oscillates between perspectives and registers as if to uncover the different layers of the text's construction and to dramatize the unsettled relationship between the character and the narrative that gives her form.

The contrast between the letters exchanged between the two sisters reveal that Nazneen takes great care in writing her letters, making them appropriate and grammatically correct. A syntactically correct, well-formed language communication connotes culture, that prunes and trims to make it proper for presentation in the society just like the controlled growth of plants to be displayed in a well maintained garden. Whereas broken thoughts, irregular language, inappropriate syntax of Hasina's letters reflect nature, wilderness, an unrestricted flow of thought, expression of the unconscious flouting the rules set by society and culture. Hasina's letter instill confidence in Nazneen. She too dreams to unfetter herself and be independent like her sister but reality induces her to adhere to the image and roles assigned to her:

Michael Perfect comments,

"The broken English in which the letters are presented seems to be... a formal representation of the vulnerability and helplessness that characterize Hasina's life in Bangladesh as well as those of other unfortunates around her."

Ali's use of italics in Hasina's letters are either to emphasise her content so as to make it stand out from Nazneen's thoughts or conveys that Hasina's letters are as it is produced.

Feminist approach to stylistics is most closely associated with the recent works of Sara Mills and Deirdre Burton. The purpose of this approach to stylistics is to explore the ways in which literature expresses a decidedly female consciousness. Sara Mills in 'Feminist Stylistics' combines the insights from literary and linguistic theory and analyses sexism, political correctness, agency and meaning in literary and non-literary texts. 'Feminist Stylistics' discusses the language and the "gendering" of texts.

There is a dialectical interrelationship between language and social structure: the varieties of linguistic usage are both products of socio-economic forces and institutions – reflexes of such factors as power relations, occupational roles, social stratifications, etc – and practices which are instrumental in forming and legitimating these same social forces and institutions. It is thus this relationship between language and social structure which feminist stylistics typically exemplifies. In doing this, it recognizes the dialectical struggle between linguistic phraseology and the sponsoring social reality and ideology. Feminist stylisticians highlight in a systematic manner the self conscious attempts by female writers to modify traditional modes of language use. They do this by identifying the dialectical features as well as the alternative forms of expression in such texts. Feminist stylistics achieves its goals through close linguistic scrutiny and the explication of linguistic theory to set out the rationale for feminist textual analysis.

There are specific significant distinctions between women's and men's writings. These occur in thematic, lexical, grammatical and graphological features. Thematically, the female sentence is seen as lacking in rationality and authority, one which is essentially emotive, as the writer 'simply pours out her feelings and her soul' in an essentially planless and structureless way. The male sentence, on the other hand has the element of control and choice. The male writer chooses to include certain elements and disregards others. The male sentence is thus clear and rational. The writer appears to be in control. He is assertive and authoritative

whereas the woman is apologetic. Also, the female sentence is that which thematically describes female experience which more often than not is about relationships while the male sentence depicts male experience. Lexically, women are said to prefer such devices of hedging as 'really', 'however', 'because' and 'so' more often than men. In addition, such personalized pronouns as 'I', 'she', 'he' and 'they' are associated with women's writings while male texts prefer determiners like 'a', 'the', 'these', 'more' and 'some'. Significantly also, feminist stylisticians repudiate such genderlectal suffixes as '-man/-woman' and '-ess' in expressions and the cataphoric use of 'he' to include male and female.

Women's writing differs at the grammatical (syntactic) level. Women writers employ shorter, pithy sentences than men. Mary P Hiatt suggests that women's sentences are generally shorter and so 'structurally less complex than longer sentences'. This observation is validated in *Brick Lane*, where Monica Ali uses simple sentences more often than complex ones. The narrative is replete with short descriptive sentences describing reactions, actions and thoughts.

They would never come out. That was how it felt.

That was because of the leaflet war.

It was because of Mrs Islam.

It was because she had not told Razia yet.

It was because of Hasina.

'It's because of me,' said Karim. (273)

His fingers brushed her cheeks.(273)

Nazneen let it pass. Perhaps even encouraged it. (194)

He shivered as well. Or perhaps it was just a yawn.(451)

He sounded irritated. He kicked his boot against the ground.(451)

She opened her eyes.

A woman swooped by on one leg. No sequins, no short skirt. She wore jeans. She raced on, on two legs.

Nazneen turned around. (492)

Razia took off her hat.

Nazneen squeaked.

'I cut it,' said Razia. 'I was fed up with it, all that brushing and brushing.'

'Will it bring my hair back? I have to go now. Don't forget the medicine. I have to go, because I am going to college. I am going to learn English. (73-74)

'I talked to Jorina. There are jobs going in the factory.'

'Oh,' said Nazneen. 'Mrs Islam says Jorina has been shamed. Her husband goes with other women. She started work, and everyone said, "He cannot feed her." (97)

Our Chairman is a man of peace. I am also a man of peace. Islam is a peaceful religion.(415)

The Questioner shrugged. He puts his hands in his pockets.(415)

Another observable distinction between the female and the male sentence at the syntactic level is that men's writing shows inclination towards subordination (suppression; hypotaxis; inequality) which is clearly exemplified by subordinate clauses and complex sentences whereas women employ co-ordination (parataxis; equality) well exhibited by the use of compound sentences or listing (syndetic/ asyndetic). The result of this is that men's writing has the effect of hierarchizing, suppressing and ordering. Coupland (2007p.58) posits in support of this view that: Feminist writers pursue non-linear, anti-hierarchical and discentred writing.

PARATAXIS

Nazneen thought sometimes of going downstairs, crossing the yard and climbing the Rosemead stairwell to the fourth floor. (19)

She would take something, an offering of samosas or bhajis, and the tattoo lady would smile and perhaps they would sit together by the window and let the time pass more easily. (19)

She spent more time talking to her daughters, and they surprised her with their intelligence, their wit and their artless sensitivity. She served her husband and found that he was a caring husband, a man of integrity, educated and equipped with a pleasing thirst for knowledge.(301)

While she sat she was no longer a collection of hopes, random thoughts, petty anxieties and selfish wants that made her, but was whole and pure. (41)

Over the last decade and a half she had gleaned vocabulary here and there. The television, the brief exchanges at the few now non- Bengali shops she entered, the dentist, the doctor, teachers at the girls' school. But it was the girls that taught her. Without lessons, textbooks or Razia's 'key phrases'. Their method was simple: they demanded to be understood. (194)

She looked at him. The triangle of hair that stood up at the front of his head, his beautiful long lashed eyes, his straight nose, the beard which buried the little mole on the chin.(451)

Glinting, dazzling, enchanting ice. She looked at the ice and slowly it revealed itself. The criss-cross patterns of a thousand surface scars, the colours that shifted and changed in the lights, the unchanging nature of what lay beneath.(492)

COMPOUND

She closed her eyes and he was still there.

She had to get out of bed and begin this day.

She got rid of his arm and turned on her side

She sat up now and looked at the clock.

He stood in front of her and took hold of both her hands.(451)

She ran her hand over her hair and pulled a piece around her face. It didn't even reach her mouth.(73)

The old Nazneen was sublimated and the new Nazneen was filled with white light, glory. (41)

Everyday of my life I have prepared for success, worked for it, waited for it, and you don't notice how the days pass until nearly a lifetime is finished. (265)

Grammatically, the text features a preponderance of simple, co-ordinate or paratactic sentences. Although there is some evidence of variety in word and sentence complexity there is obvious preference in the texts for short, parallel, allusive and antithetical structures. This confirms, to a greater extent, Hiatt's and Coupland's contentions quoted earlier about the anti-hierarchical nature of the female sentence. The text is replete with devices - parataxis, antithesis and rhetorical anaphora.

The common lexico-semantic items in a majority of women's texts are those which refer to opinions, appearance, impressions, certainty, decisions, changes in decisions stemming from new awareness and the consequent transition in behaviour. These features are quite visible in Ali's writing:

Whenever she got a letter from Hasina, for the next couple of days she imagined herself an independent woman too. The letters were long and detailed. Nazneen composed and recomposed her replies until the grammar was satisfactory, all errors expunged along any vital signs. But Hasina kicked aside all constraints: her letters were full of mistakes and bursting with life. Nazneen threaded herself between the words, allowed them to spool her across seven seas to Dhaka, where she worked alongside her sister... when Chanu arrived home. Then she made vows to herself. Regular prayers, regular housework, no more dreaming (94).

INDECISIVENESS

She thought of it but would not go. ... She could spend another day alone. It was only another day. (19)

Regular prayer, regular housework, regular visits with Razia. She told her mind to be still. She told her heart, do not beat with fear, do not beat with desire. (51)

Her first thought was that she would go to Dhaka with her husband and her children. It would be the right thing to do, and she would be with Hasina again. Doubts assailed her on all sides. The children would be miserable. Shahana would never adjust. What would happen to Chanu in Dhaka? If his dreams fell apart what net would catch them all? How would they live? How would they eat? Would it not be better to stay here and send more money to Hasina and help her that way? Maybe even bring her over here. But if Chanu went ahead and left without them, then what? Would she marry Karim? Did she want to marry him? It would be difficult for the girls. And it would be impossible simply to spurn him. Perhaps it would be best to go to Dhaka. (405)

Brick Lane corroborates the contention of feminist stylistics that the female sentence prefers coordination to subordination and hierarchy as well as lack of completion. The text does not contain any significant subordinate clauses. Rather, Ali seems to prefer the stylistic juxtaposition of antithetical clauses. With few exceptions, the text overtly exemplifies parataxis (parallel co-ordinated clauses)/antithesis (juxtaposition). Indeed, even in these exceptions there is evidence of parallel structures, the difference being that these are overshadowed by the peculiar feminist graphological features of exclamation mark, and, semi colon. Devices for securing contrast are skillfully employed in the antithetical arrangement of the essential clauses and phrases: The most obvious characteristic of these clauses is that they are short, sharp, pointed and feminine. Their rhythmic patterns are enhanced by the hyperbolic tropes which enable them to 'rebel' against male dominance typically represented by subordination and hierarchization.

Thus, it would be appropriate to judge women's writing from women's perspective endowed with finer sensibilities to judge her writings. Thus, feminist approaches in narratology and stylistics should be utilized in order to have an unbiased analysis of their narratives.

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