

## Analyzing *Ecriture Feminine* in “The Laugh of the Medusa”

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### **Abstract:**

*This paper aims to explore French feminist, Helen Cixous’ revolt against oppressive phallogentric language and patriarchal conventions through her formulation of a new form of writing known as *écriture féminine* or feminine writing through her seminal essay “The Laugh of the Medusa”. Establishing the rightful authority of women in a male dominated society, Cixous’ *écriture féminine* is a reaction against female repression by phallogentric structures of the Western society.*

*Écriture féminine is the expression of the female body and sexuality in writing, an expression that cannot be coded or theorized. Cixous employs the motif of Medusa as a metaphor for women’s multiplicity that opposes patriarchal strictures on women’s body and voice. The research further foregrounds Cixous’ deconstruction of Jacques Lacan’s phallogentrism and Sigmund Freud’s misogynist “psychoanalytic closure” for women as she seeks to free all suppressed desires and impulses in women.*

**Key words:** *écriture féminine*, psychoanalytic, phallogentrism, Freud, Lacan, oppression, masculine, feminine writing

Helen Cixous writes of women “... ‘woman’, we still don’t know what that means, even if we know what we want to mean...In any case, she is not a woman. She is plural. Like all living beings, who are sometimes invaded, drawing life from others, giving life. Who do not know themselves.”(Bray 2004, 1). Woman, the very source and provider of every symptom of life

is as significant as the air and the water to our existence. She is a being without whom the survival of humankind is impossible for she gives life to the term life. Yet the systematic deprivation of women has been a fact as much in life as in language. Thus while the strong waves of feminism championed the cause of women in a male chauvinistic society, condemning gender difference and advocating gender equality in all domains of life, the post-structuralist feminists, a branch of post-structuralism that evolved during the 1960s and 1970s, were more concerned about elaborating and deconstructing gender difference in language. It was during this time that Helen Cixous, while exploring the relation between gender and writing, devised a new form of writing known as *écriture féminine* or feminine writing. In this paper I endeavour to explore Cixous' theorization of feminine writing and the concepts associated with it by which she seeks to liberate womankind from the shackles of phallogentric language.

Cixous encountered misogyny for the first time in Paris of which she writes "I abruptly learned that my unacceptable truth in this world is being a woman. Right away, it was war. I felt the explosion, the odour of misogyny." (Sellers 12). While Bray affirms that Cixous' experience of misogyny coupled with her multicultural diasporic background cast her "to the place of the other", making her aware of the need for an 'other' way of thinking, a reaction against all forms of oppression including the feminine repression by the phallogentric structures of Western society, Critic Conley, on the other hand, believes that it was the intellectual ferment in May 1968, the "belief in the revolutionary power of language and of hopes of shattering of oppressive structures...the banner of liberation in teaching, criticism and writing...[and] an effort to determine how and where women have been excluded and how to question and undo that conclusion" (1984, 1) that led Cixous to destroy the Lacanian Symbolic order of binary opposition in language by representing the feminine in Western discourse.

It was between 1975 and 1977 that Cixous produced her theoretical writings exploring the relation between women, femininity, feminism and the production of texts: *La Jeune Née* (in collaboration with Catherine Clement, 1975), 'Le Rire de la Meduse' (1975), translated as 'The Laugh of the Medusa' (1976), 'Le Sexe ou la tete?' (1976), translated as 'Castration or decapitation?' (1981) and *La Venue à l'écriture* (1977). It was during this time that she propounded an alternative writing for women, a writing that would penetrate the confining structures of phallogentric discourse, that would help women reclaim their voices silenced through history, a history dominated by the Symbolic order privileging the masculine while subjugating its female counterpart.

It was in the essay "The Laugh of the Medusa" that Cixous introduced the concept of *écriture féminine* or feminine writing. However, the question remains: what exactly is feminine writing? How can it be defined? Bray puts it as "the avant – garde textual practice that challenges and moves beyond the constraints of phallogentric thought...a path towards thought through the body." *Écriture féminine* or feminine writing, strictly speaking, is about the representation of the feminine body as a path towards thought, a thought that would question the foundations of male-centric thinking, that which would "unsilence" the female voice enabling them to manifest their unconscious hidden self or "the Other" in androcentric language.

In "The Laugh of the Medusa", Cixous explicates the subjugation of the female voice by exploring the myth of the Medusa and the various connotations associated with the "deadly" but otherwise "beautiful" Medusa. According to the Greek myth, Medusa was cursed by the goddess Minerva, transforming her into a monstrous figure with snake like hair and a gaze that could turn anyone into stone. She was later killed by Perseus by slaying her head. Cixous interprets this myth of Medusa's death as men's attempt to silence the voice of

women, to cut off women's languages, thus deconstructing Freud's theory of the "castration complex" in men during the Oedipal stage of psychosexual development and the Lacanian theory of Symbolic Order in the development of language.

Let us look into the psychoanalytic theories invented by Freud and Lacan of which Cixous makes a mention in her essay and by which she was deeply influenced. Freud, in his essay "Medusa's Head", puts forth the idea that the decapitation of Medusa's head is a symbol that manifests the castration complex in males in the Oedipal stage wherein realizing the absence of the penis or phallus in the mother, the male child inevitably identifying with the father, for the fear of being castrated, thus rejecting the mother and overcoming his fear. Psychoanalyst Lacan, adopting Freud's theory in the domain of language development, states that with the rejection of what he calls the "womb worlds" of the mother, the child enters the patrilineal world systematized by order and concrete rules which Lacan terms the "Symbolic Order". As a member of the Symbolic Order the male child learns the spoken word that is the language of the world, while rejecting the pre-linguistic language of the mother, whereas the girl child, being anatomically similar to her mother, continues to identify with her and hence with the prelinguistic language of the mother. Thus Lacan believes that girls acquire a different language than boys, a language that, according to Lacan, is primitive, silent like the womb world of the mother. The language of women thus remains undeciphered by men and is thus repressed and silenced by the male ordered discourse. This draws us back again to the myth of the Medusa whose death signifies the triumph of the Symbolic order (i.e the spoken word) and the domination of the female voice, the pre-linguistic, primitive language of the womb world.

By rejecting such male oriented theories, Cixous in her essay, "The Laugh of the Medusa", urges women to write beyond the order of binary opposition of the Symbolic Order, to

speak and write through their bodies, to explore the beauty of the unconscious, to uncensor their erogenous pleasures, thus deconstructing the value hierarchies that shape the androcentric world. She writes, "Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring them to writing...Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement." (Leitch 2035)

According to Cixous, the domination of the female voice and in turn the absence of a feminine discourse in the past had stagnated and concealed the creative force of the female writers thus chaining them within the barriers of masculine language. She believes that such writing, which is in no way different from the male writing, could only aim at "obscure[ing] women or reproducing the classic representations of women (as sensitive – intuitive – dreamy etc.)", something which distinctly reminds me of women writers of the Victorian period internalizing and imitating the dominant structures of male tradition, their writing reflecting a conflict between "obedience and resistance" (Showalter).

Drawing on Lacan's paradigm of Symbolic Order, which states that while men possess the phallus and are henceforth closer to the Symbolic, women on the contrary are the peripheral beings of the Symbolic Order, Cixous considers this marginal position of women within the Symbolic Order a boon in disguise because she, like the other poststructuralist feminists, believes that women, being far from the vicinity of the Symbolic, are unlike their male counterparts closer to the imaginary and fantasies and far removed from fixed meanings and reasons. In an exchange with Conley, Cixous speaks of women's marginal position in the Symbolic Order which in turn favours women: "He is assigned the scene of castration. He must defend his phallus; if not it is death...Women do have another chance. They can indulge in this type of life because by definition and for culturally negative reasons they are not called upon...to participate in the big social fete – which is

phallogocentric." (Conley 1984, 135). Women's language is thus unstable and free flowing, a language that surpasses the confines of fixed meanings and reason, which, when represented in writing, will "give her an access to her native strength: it will give her back her goods, her pleasures...her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal." In "The Laugh of the Medusa" Cixous thus advocates the writing of feminine sexuality, that would help women reclaim their buried voice thereby escaping the language of the father. This she terms *écriture féminine* or writing of the feminine.

To begin with, Cixous contends that *écriture féminine* could only be manifested in the genre of poetry as opposed to the "coded, clichéd, ordinary language" (Conley 1984, 5) contained in prose. Employing the structure of binary opposition, Cixous asserts that the language of poetry (unlike prose) is not trite, but holds manifold meanings, it is closer to the unconscious and hence closer to female sexuality (female bodies - wherein lies their unconscious repressed by the "superegoized structure"). For Cixous, novelists are but the "allies of representationalism." According to Conley, poetry for Cixous, "condenses, renders opaque, carries great psychic density. It is opposed to the discourse that flattens, systematizes." (1984, 5).

Feminine writing, Cixous suggests, could be materialised in two forms or "levels". The first being the individual or "metaphorical" wherein the individual woman "must write herself, her body must be heard," she should explore and discover and exhibit her sexuality in writing and describe the pleasures or "jouissance" (Lacanian term) of sexuality.

Drawing on Hegel's "patriarchal binary thought" Cixous, like Derrida, aims at deconstructing the popular male/female opposition wherein in the struggle for power the male is invariably declared the winner and in turn the active being, whereas the female signifies the defeated and hence the

passive. In the structural level, Cixous asserts that women by writing their body will create a new signifying order. She will no longer remain passive but emerge as a source of power and energy, an identity by itself.

By writing the body, in feminine discourse, Cixous, like her contemporary, Luce Irigay, seeks to deconstruct the singular or linear writing that structures the masculine language. According to both Cixous and Irigay, women operate from a plural, circular, and aimless economy (Sellers) and hence their language is plural as their plurality is contained in their sex organs which, unlike men's, is not singular but multiple. Cixous believes that women's speech has always been dominated by the "voice of the mother" which becomes the echo of the "primeval" song she once heard "first music from the first voice of love which is alive in every woman." Drawing on Lacan's theory of the Symbolic stage, Cixous philosophises that a woman's speech and writing is united with the womb world of the mother, a world that is not bound by time that is nameless and with no syntax. (Routledge 113) Unlike man, the woman never "heaps up [her] libidinal drives", she never represses the mother, instead she is always closer to the mother. Like the mother her voice, her speech and writing is nurtourous, she is generous – "the dispenser of love, nourishment and plenitude." (Routledge 115). This brings us to the concept of the "Other", which Cixous states, if not elaborates, in "The Laugh of the Medusa."

Influenced by Simone de Beauvoir's writing "The Second Sex" where she states that women are positioned as the Other in relation to the concept of Self which has been colonized by patriarchy (Bray 2004, 73), Cixous proposes that women should represent the "Other" in their writing to liberate themselves from the defining walls of phallogentric language. By "Other" I believe, Cixous refers to the mother or as Bray writes the "m(other)." According to Bray, this "Otherness" in women will provide them room enough to express their primeval,

uninhibited desire, something which remains uncoded by the Symbolic Order. To quote Cixous, "the Other, that part of you that leaves a space between yourself and urges you to inscribe in language your woman's style."

In her essay "Castration" Cixous writes, "to sign with a woman's name doesn't necessarily make a piece of writing feminine...and conversely, the fact that a piece of writing signed with a man's name does not in itself exclude femininity. It's rare but you can sometimes find femininity in writings signed by men: it does happen." In "The Laugh of the Medusa", Cixous conceives yet another concept known as "the other bisexuality" to deconstruct the old opposition between masculine and feminine. Alluding to the "classical conception of bisexuality...squashed under the emblem of castration fear" which defines feminine and masculine sexuality singularly and separately, Cixous, opposing this view, propounds "the other bisexuality." "The other bisexuality" exceeds the limits of binary opposition of masculinity and femininity; it obliterates the distinctions between them. For Cixous, writing in itself is an "in betweenness", a bisexual practice, "the process of the same and of the other without which nothing can live, undoing the work of death...". Cixous believes that bisexual writing is essentially women's writing as women are closer to their pre Oedipal stage of bisexuality, unlike their male counterpart. "Women", she writes, are "benefitting from this vatic bisexuality which doesn't annul differences but stirs them up, pursues them, increases their number." However Cixous also believes that by dissolving the old system of oppositions, bisexual writing enables sexuality to be represented by both male and female. She asserts her claim by providing examples of the German poet Kleist and Jean Genet who employed female libidinal economy or the female desire in their writing.

"Now, I – woman am going to blow up the Law: an explosion henceforth possible and ineluctable...in language." In saying so, Cixous devises yet another concept, that of "the third



body," something which finds mention in her essays "Coming to Writing" and "The third Body." Bray defines the third body as the merging of the masculine and feminine that dissolves opposition and creates a body which defies the Symbolic Law and moves towards the limitless (Bray 2004, 62-63). The third body, which arises out of "desire for the other, whole and entire, male or female, strips the penis of its significance and dominance, thus defining the masculine and the feminine as a whole and not as mere complimentary beings." Such desire for the other that creates the third body and liberates womankind should be represented in writing. Cixous believes that in reality women can decry the Freudian theory of a family which operates on the psychoanalytic theory of castration, by writing the third body, by writing their desire "because living means wanting everything that is, everything that lives and wanting it alive." For women, in order to live, to represent the Other contained within the self and the Other, the masculine, love, Cixous theorizes must be brought into writing. In "Coming to Writing" Cixous asserts that "writing is a gesture of love." By introducing the idea of love in writing, Cixous proposes to efface the phallogocentric structure of opposition, thus creating a limitless form of writing which allows for the existence of both masculine and the feminine as an independent whole. According to Bray, "love is about receiving the strangeness of the other...it is...an openness to the unknown, the unthought." (Bray 2004, 75). Love, I believe, forms an inherent part of *écriture féminine*, for love characterizes the feminine, love like the woman nurtures writing; it gives life to feminine *écriture*, "... a love that has no commerce with the apprehensive desire that provides against the lack..." (2056). Thus by employing the concept of love Cixous provides both man and woman the space to write and represent each other in writing.

Thus, by theorising such concepts as "the Other," "the other bisexuality," and "the third body" in her essay "The Laugh of the Medusa," Cixous defines a new way of writing, the

feminine writing or *écriture féminine*, something that voices out the desires, the pleasures of sexuality of their body. *Écriture féminine* truly seeks to define the feminine body or more precisely, the female libidinal economy, for Cixous believes in liberating the female body, long repressed and inhibited within the patriarchal stranglehold. Although feminists like Teresa Elbert and Mary Jacobus have rejected *écriture féminine* as something that “risks re-essentialising the feminine and constructing a new identity anchored in a reified notion of body and language (Bray 2004, 30), nevertheless it cannot be ruled out altogether that *écriture féminine* produces a language that surpasses the phallogocentric “Cartesian duality” and yet permits both men and women to manifest the female sexuality in their writing.

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