

IMPACT FACTOR: 7.86

ISSN 0976 - 8165



THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

12th Year of Open Access

Bi-Monthly Refereed and Peer-Reviewed
Open Access e-Journal

Vol. XII, Issue-1 (February 2021)

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

Reading of Sexual/Textual Politics by Toril Moi to Study and Analyze Anglo-American and French Feminism through Moian Lens

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Article History: Submitted-30/01/2021, Revised-20/02/2021, Accepted-22/02/2021, Published-28/02/2021.

Abstract:

Feminist perspective in European context is considered to be spearheaded by Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792). Her lead was later taken by other feminist writers such as Margaret Fuller, Harriet Martineau, Virginia Woolf and many others, who were resisting against the patriarchal economy responsible for women's inferior position in the society. However, the palpable upheaval in the hegemonic phallogocentric culture could be felt with Simone de Bouvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) with her compelling pronouncement, 'one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman'. Her ideas on unjustifiable gender inequality were appropriated and reformulated by later feminists and thus arose the two main approaches of feminist critical practice as observed by Toril Moi in her phenomenal book *Sexual/Textual Politics*. This paper attempts to study and analyze Moi's critical practice of examining the approaches of Anglo-American and French feminists through the selected works of the theorists discussed by Moi.

Keywords: politics, humanism, aesthetics, Lacanian Psychoanalysis, feminist, femininity, binary, écriture feminine, deconstruction.

Introduction:

Published in 1985, Moi's *Sexual/Textual Politics* with its detailed exposition of some of the major feminist writers during 1960s and 1970s (the period during which feminism in its role as a theory and as a practice is supposed to have taken a giant step) is regarded as the pioneering text when it comes to the "cartography of feminism" as a theory and as a critical

practice. The credit for coining the term “Anglo-American criticism” as well as popularising the term “French feminism” coined by Alice Jardine undoubtedly goes to Toril Moi. In the preface to her seminal work Moi calls her book as the “first full introduction” to feminist literary theory intended for the general reader as well as for the student of literature. Moi further explains to her readers the main objective behind writing of the book:

I have aimed to present the two main approaches to feminist theory, the Anglo-American and the French through detailed discussion of the most representative figures on each side (xiii).

Thus, Moi’s main concern is to discuss the methods and politics within feminist literary theory and practice. She feels that there is dearth of debates within feminist criticism because of the dominance of hegemonic patriarchy. She criticizes the idea of “sisterhood”, which she feels is the strategy of patriarchal economy to preclude any criticism within feminist struggle. According to Moi feminist criticism needs to situate itself within the perspective of feminist politics in order to expose patriarchal practices. In her role as a feminist literary critic, Moi therefore positions herself within the perspective of feminist politics and accordingly critiques the approaches of various feminist thinkers to let the readers know how their approaches could be termed as either imitative or deconstructive of hegemonic economy, when considered from feminist perspective.

Anglo-American Feminist Criticism: Women Writing and Writing about Women

Moi begins her analysis of Anglo-American feminist criticism by focussing her discussion on *Sexual Politics* (1969) by Kate Millett and *Thinking About Women* (1968) by Mary Ellmann, the two books which according to Moi could be called as feminist classics of the 1960’s.

Millett’s *Sexual Politics* according to Moi was a path-breaking feminist thesis during the time it was written, because opposing the New Critics, Millett strongly suggested that without studying social and cultural contexts literature cannot be understood properly. Another striking feature of Millett’s critical study as observed through Moian lens is Millett’s rejection of authoritarian discourse and her strong advocacy of reader’s viewpoint, which as Moi writes, “suited to feminism’s political purposes” (25). However, Moi is quick to add that though *Sexual Politics* was a pioneering text in terms of its significance as feminist theory, it can hardly be considered as a model for the later feminist, because Millett’s criticism was focussed exclusively on male authors with the sole exception of Charlotte Bronte. Also, even when it came to critiquing the male authors, according to Moi Millett’s criticism is flawed by

reductionism. As an example, Moi cites Millett's rejection of Freud, which as per Moi was only because Millett found Freud's theories of penis envy as well as female masochism as distasteful. Moi asserts that the later feminist, though critiqued Freud, they also appropriated Freudian theory to develop feminist theory from psychoanalytical perspective.

Next Moi discusses *Thinking About Women* which Moi says was though published before Millett's thesis, did not become as influential as Millett's *Sexual Politics* and the primary reason which Moi feels for relatively lukewarm response to *Thinking About Women* was because Ellmann's essay unlike Millet's *Sexual Politics* does not deal with political and historical aspects of patriarchy independently of literary analysis. Moi further says that Ellmann in her sardonic or satirical style essentially deals with the illogical nature of "thought by sexual analogy". In other words, Ellmann's aim of writing the essay is to expose how the sexual stereotypes constructed by the patriarchal ideology are self-destructive and thus can be easily transformed to show its contingent condition. According to Moi *Thinking About Women* is an ironic masterpiece which indulges in deconstructive style and thus, as "part of her deconstructive project, Ellmann recommends exploiting the sexual stereotypes for all they worth for our own political purposes" (39). Moi strongly feels that Ellmann's book has been unfairly received by many feminist critics, mainly because her deconstructive style through sardonic humour was misunderstood as feminine style by most of the feminist critics. Thus, though the feminist critics in the early 1970s considered Ellmann as one of their precursors while writing their essays in the collected volume entitled *Images of Women in Fiction: Feminist Perspectives*, Moi feels that they "invariably proceed to adopt the very categories Ellmann tried to deconstruct" (41)

Moi strongly feels that it was from about 1975, that there was a significant change in the perspective of feminist criticism. Whereas the earlier texts written by Millet, Ellmann and other feminist who wrote their essays in *Images of Women in Fiction* chiefly dealt with male writers and the images of women they portrayed through their writings, from the late 1970s the focus shifted to exclusively on the works of women writers. According to Moi the three texts which represent the "coming-of-age of Anglo-American feminist criticism" (52) are: Ellen Moers's, *Literary Women* (1976), Elaine Showalter's, *A Literature of Our Own* (Their 1977) and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979). These feminist critics firmly believed that it is "society", not "biology" that shapes women's different perception of the world and thus, their writing can be seen as resistance to the dominant patriarchal matrix.

According to Moi, Moers's book *Literary Women* endeavoured to describe the history of women's writing as "rapid and powerful undercurrent" running alongside the male tradition.

Her book critically surveys the works of women writers from the early eighteenth century and because it was the first time that such writing was attempted by a woman writer, it received wide recognition during the time that it was written. Moi feels that Moers surely deserved praise in 1977, but the reader in 1985 may not agree with her views and will also not feel that the book has any substantial value to be considered as either literary history or as literary criticism. Moers's conviction in conventional literary categories and her faith in critical practice based on Western humanism, regarding the concept of "greatness" becomes problematic according to Moi, because the category of "greatness" is contentious when considered from feminist viewpoint and in fact, feminists wish to challenge the norms on which it is based.

Elaine Showalter, the next writer taken for discussion by Moi, strongly disagrees with Moers's views on women's writing as powerful undercurrent alongside the male tradition. According to Showalter, women writers, who were recognized during their lifetime for their remarkable writing, were conveniently forgotten after their death and thus, were never included in the literary canon dominated by the patriarchal economy. Showalter in her epochal book *A Literature of Their Own* describes the development of female literary tradition as a subculture and categorises the phases in women writing as:

- Feminine- the phase of imitation of the prevailing mode of dominant tradition and also internalization of its views on social roles.
- Feminist- the phase of recognition of oppressive values and protest against these values along with demand for autonomy from these rigid rules.
- Female - a phase of self-discovery by rebelliously denouncing the patriarchal dominance.

According to Moi, Showalter's primary contribution to literary history and to feminist criticism is her rediscovery of the forgotten women writers and also giving them the recognition, which eluded them under the impact of literary canon dominated by patriarchy.

The next important writers discussed by Moi are Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, whose ambitious volume, *The Madwoman in the Attic* is an insightful study of the major women writers of the nineteenth century such as Jane Austen, Mary Shelley, George Eliot, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti and Emily Dickinson. Gilbert and Gubar expose the dominant literary images of "femininity" in the nineteenth century, which were predominantly male fantasies. Thus, the "eternal feminine" was assumed to be an image of angelic beauty such as Dante's Beatrice and Goethe's Gretchen. The ideal woman according to this imagination was invariably seen as a passive and a selfless creature. However, Gilbert

and Gubar strongly feel that behind this angel hid the monster figure, the archetype of the male fear of femininity. According to Gilbert and Gubar, the novels written by women writers of the nineteenth century reveal the “female schizophrenia of authorship”, because the “dark double figure” in the novel, such as the witch or the madwoman was the image of the writer’s own ‘self’.

Moi’s criticism against Gilbert and Gubar is that their approach is reductive, because their critical work on women writers never questions the authority of woman as an author. Moi feels that if feminists reject the male authoritarian model based on author as the Father of the text, they need to equally introspect and thus cannot take another model based on author as the Mother of the text. Moi asserts that “if we are to undo this patriarchal practice of authority, we must take one further step and proclaim with Roland Barthes the death of the author” (63). Moi suggests that we need to come out of the totalitarian model of texts and instead should look at texts’ multiplicity, intertextuality and mutability, once the author is removed as a result of “death of the author” as proclaimed by Barthes.

Moi concludes by saying that though Anglo-American feminist critics wish to be political, their purpose gets defeated, because they still wish to stick to the aesthetic criteria of realism with its belief in integrity, wholeness and the unity of the texts. They also endeavour to transform all texts written by women into feminist texts without realizing that political programme is important while analyzing and categorizing a work as a feminist text.

When it comes to theoretical reflections, Moi strongly feels that “Anglo-American feminist critics have been mostly indifferent or even hostile towards literary theory, which they have often regarded as hopelessly abstract ‘male’ activity” (70). Though there were changes in this attitude in the 1980’s with the theoretical writings of Annette Kolodny, Elaine Showalter and Myra Jehlen, yet it did not look at textuality of sexuality in a radical way, as was later analyzed by the French feminist.

Annette Kolodny’s “Some notes on defining a ‘feminist literary criticism’”, published first in the journal, *Critical Inquiry* in 1975 is the first critical text on feminist criticism as asserted by Moi in her analysis of Anglo-American critics. According to Moi, Kolodny expresses her wish to study women’s writing as a separate category, but immediately expresses her anxiety of this approach, because according to her it would lead to the debate between biological essentialism and social influence. Moi further writes that Kolodny also feels that without comparison between writing by men and women, she cannot arrive at a difference in style. Finally, Kolodny proposes that we should begin with treating each and every author and each work by the author as unique and individual to arrive at a conclusion regarding feminine

style in literature. Moi feels that this is an improbable task because as a reader it is difficult to be completely objective and not to get influenced either by the writer or by the work of the writer.

Moi asserts that Kolodny's approach is based on New Critical ground, as according to her the principal task of feminist criticism is to analyse style and image in the literary texts without any prejudice. New Criticism emphasizes close reading of the work and rejects old historicism's attention to biographical and sociological matters. Moi feels that this objective reading will be problematical to those "rebel feminists, who might want to study literature improperly (as Kate Millett did) to read 'against the grain' and question the established structures of 'legitimate literary criticism'" (73). Moi feels that Kolodny theoretical debate pays too little attention to the role of politics in critical theory.

Next, Moi takes two of Showalter's articles on feminist literary theory, "Towards a feminist poetics" and "Feminist criticism in the wilderness" to check theoretical aspect in Showalter's writings. Showalter differentiates feminist criticism into two categories. The first category is feminist critique, which deals with woman as a reader of texts written by male writers. The second category, which is an important one deals woman as a writer, and Showalter, calls this "gynocritics". Showalter feels that feminist critique is limited in scope because here we see women's experiences from male point of view. She prefers gynocritics, which is the study of women's writings, where one can learn what women have felt and experienced. Moi says that Showalter's view regarding texts providing real "human experience" ends in colluding with Western patriarchal humanism with its insistence on realism.

Showalter's next article, "Feminist criticism in the wilderness" delineates four main approaches of feminist criticism of 1980. She categorizes them as biological, linguistic, psychoanalytic and cultural criticism. Though here Showalter seems to accept theory as part of feminist programme, Moi feels that Showalter has not elaborated with conviction her concern with the male critical theory and feminists' problems with theory. Thus, she ends up in a paradoxical position, because on the one hand she denounces Lacan, Macherey and Engels, but on the other hand "ends up by extolling as particularly suitable for 'gynocritical' activity the cultural theory developed by Edwin Ardener and Clifford Geertz" (77). Moi strongly feels that Anglo-American criticism of Showalter leans towards creating a separate canon of women's writing and does not want to abolish the hegemonized canon. Moi feels that a new canon could also result in being oppressive like the old one, which will now be dominated by gynocritical writing.

Myra Jehlen's article "Archimedes and the paradox of feminist criticism" argues for the case of radical comparativism. According to Moi, Jehlen feels that the woman-centered works by Moers, Showalter, Gilbert and Gubar with their focus on the female tradition in literature leans towards producing an alternative context for women's writing, which will be a "sort of female enclave apart from the universe of masculinist assumptions" (80). Jehlen further argues that only through comparative studies one can come to the understanding of difference between women's writing and men's writing. This, according to Moi becomes an ironical statement, because feminists know that there is no space outside patriarchy from which women can speak, and thus, one cannot be sure of any untainted feminist discourse. According to Moi, Jehlen's political position too is quite apolitical when she asserts that texts are the encoded message of the author's voice and therefore "critical objectivity" should be in decoding and faithfully representing this message for readers' consumption.

After delineating these representative Anglo-American critics and their approaches, Moi claims that these critics seem to prefer to continue the tradition of male oriented humanism. Thus, despite its apparently overt political engagement with sexual politics, in the end it does not turn out to be political for feminist criticism. Their inhibition towards theoretical approach and thus, keeping politics and aesthetics away from each other becomes a stumbling block for considering their approach as "revolutionary" which could help in deconstruction of patriarchal values.

French Feminist Theory and its Deconstructive Approach

Moi writes that the French feminism is the result of students' revolt of May 1968 in Paris, in which many of the French intellectuals, including the two most famous names Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault were student participants. These events transformed the feminist theory in France as it got saturated with Derridean deconstruction and Lacanian psychoanalysis with its "uncompromising intellectualism". For her analysis on French feminist theory, Moi focuses on the "holy trinity" viz, Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva as the most representative figures.

Moi begins her study of French feminism with Helene Cixous and writes that some of the most influential of Cixous's work related to feminism are her essays, "The Laugh of Medusa" (1976) and "Castration or decapitation" (1981), where she explores women's desire and women's language. Moi observes that Cixous's analysis of language made Cixous understand that language we use is imbued with patriarchal binary structure. Cixous gives examples of the oppositional dichotomies which she came across in language, such as:

Culture/Nature

Father/Mother

Intelligible/Sensitive

Active/Passive

Sun/Moon

Cixous further indicates in all these oppositional binaries (which in the end come back to the fundamental binary male/female) there is a visible hierarchy, where the feminine side is always seen as negative. Cixous uses Derrida's deconstructive philosophy to analyze and deconstruct this binary scheme of thought. Cixous doesn't just stop at Derridean deconstructive tools such as "difference" and "free play" of signifiers in order to deconstruct the binarized thought process of Western humanism, but goes further ahead and by appropriating Lacanian psychoanalysis speaks of the possibility of "écriture feminine", which according to Cixous is feminine writing from the pre-Oedipal or imaginary phase. Cixous calls the pre-Oedipal writing as feminine writing, not with the intention of binarizing the term, but because she feels that though in the pre-Oedipal phase there are no oppositional binaries, the phase is yet associated with the mother's body and therefore, the source of writing according to Cixous is named as feminine. Cixous further proposes the concept of "bisexuality" in order to resist the phallogocentric discourse and to claim écriture feminine, which is the writing to express "self" using the libidinal economy free of socially constructed constraint. Drawing on Lacan, according to whom a male child has to repress his libidinal feelings for fear of castration to return to symbolic order and to its monosexuality, Cixous says that bisexual writing is therefore, most likely to be women's writing. However, she says that some men may be able to transgress monosexuality and thus could be able to use écriture feminine. She gives examples of Colette and Jean Genet who qualify as bisexual or feminine writers.

Critiquing her work, Moi says that Cixous's writing can help feminist to focus on desire in language. However, at the same time Moi feels that her deconstructive approach towards patriarchal textuality is weakened by her insistence on "écriture feminine" as the way of thinking of feminine essence.

The next French theorist taken for discussion by Moi is Luce Irigaray, who wrote some groundbreaking works such as *Speculum of the Other Women* (1974) and *This Sex which is not One* (1977). According to Moi, Irigaray too follows the deconstructive path adopted by Cixous and thus examines the strategies of phallogocentrism that are responsible for looking at woman as man's opposite or his "Other" i.e. his negative or specular image. Reformulating Freud's oedipal complex, Irigary asserts that as per Freud there is no sexual difference in the pre-

Oedipal stage and it is only with the ego formation that the child begins to see his father as a rival. As for a girl child, according to Irigaray, he was forced to write that a girl child suffers from “penis envy” or organ inferiority because of Freud’s complete deference to the specular logic. Irigaray asserts that female becomes a mirror of man’s specular or negative image of masculinity and thus, is denied the pleasure of self-representation. Irigaray suggests a specific woman’s language, which she calls “le parler femme” or “womanspeak”, which resist conventional forms, figures as well as concepts. Irigaray posits femininity as plural and multiple and not specular in the sense that it does not work on an “either/or model”.

Commenting on Irigaray, Moi says that her idea of speculum is ahistorical, as it implies that patriarchal discourse is universalist and inflexible. Irigaray fails to study the historical impact of patriarchal discourses on women. In her attempt to deconstruct the patriarchal discourse through specifically woman’s language, Irigaray ends up essentializing woman and thus, her model of womanspeak invites the danger of becoming another strategy of patriarchal discourse to keep women in “their” place.

Kristeva, the next French feminist theorist too worked on the problems of “language” through her major works such as *Desire in Language* (1980) and *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982) as observed through Moian lens. Moi writes that according to Kristeva Western metaphysics believed in language on “Cartesian thinking man model”, as linear, universal and rational, whereas in reality language for Kristeva is heterogeneous, irrational and constantly prone to mutability, thus refusing to follow the supposed standardised patriarchal structure. Unlike Irigaray and Cixous’s observation on language, Kristeva feels that language itself cannot be called as sexist or non-sexist, because in terms of a signifying process, language is a constant interaction between the margin and the centre, which makes language not a coherent patriarchal entity, but instead as seen through Kristevan lens, language appears as an incoherent, fragmented and disruptive identity.

Moi writes that Kristeva reformulates Lacan’s idea of imaginary and symbolic as the steps towards identity formation into semiotic and symbolic. Semiotic, according to her is linked to the pre-Oedipal phase, the primordial unrepresentable space or a language before language, which though is marginal, when considered with respect to its position with the symbolic, the patriarchal discourse, can subvert the structures of traditional linguistics. Semiotic, as Kristeva asserts, is the mother’s body, or the “chora” which is pre-linguistic and acts as “pulsional pressure” on symbolic. Thus, Kristevan language analysis sees the subject as subject-in-process, who although cannot avoid entering the symbolic, is constantly unsettled by the semiotic. Kristeva further asserts that one can perceive the repressed chora only as

“contradictions, meaninglessness, disruption, silences and absences in the symbolic language. It constitutes, in other words, the heterogenous, disruptive dimension of language”. (162)

Kristeva's approach, according to Moi is anti-essentialist and this can be seen in her theory of the constitution of the subject as subject in process due to the impact of pre-Oedipal phase, where sexual difference does not exist. As per Moi the common factor between semiotic and the feminism is that as the feminine is considered as marginal under patriarchy, so is semiotic considered to be marginal in the language. Kristeva's idea of marginality shifts the repression of the feminine in terms of “positionality” rather than essences. According to Kristeva, as pointed out through her observation of subject-in-process, “woman as such does not exist” (169) and therefore, one cannot think of speaking like a woman. Thus, instead of emphasizing the gender of the speaker, Kristeva feels that it is important to study the role of discourses that construct the individual.

While appreciating Kristeva's insights on language and textuality of sexuality, Moi asserts that her emphasis on the semiotic as pre-linguistic becomes problematic, because it cannot be considered as revolutionary to deconstruct the symbolic, which is the conscious arena of language. Kristeva also does not take into account the social and material conditions which affect the symbolic patriarchal structure. Nevertheless, Moi claims that Kristeva's perspective on language as heterogeneous structure, which constitutes the fragmentary subject can help feminist criticism to analyze “writing” as a process which defies gender and thus goes beyond the binary of patriarchal matrix.

Conclusion

The first and the most important feature of *Sexual/Textual Politics* is Moi's well researched attempt to elucidate the two main approaches in feminist critical practice, Anglo-American feminism and French feminism, which dominated the feminist literary theory in 1960's and 1970s. Anglo-American feminism as described through Moian perspective is not yet ready to sever the umbilical cord it shares with liberal humanism and thus articulates the essential conception of the “unitary self” and “metaphysics of presence”, which is the characteristic of liberal humanism. Moi argues that Anglo-American feminism appropriates the same assumptions and methods of Western critical practice and, therefore, cannot be said to be political in nature. She says that Anglo-American critical practice remains faithful to Lukacsian realism and humanism and thus ends up following and adhering to patriarchal ideology. She further says that their sexual politics is not political enough because it keeps patriarchal values and aesthetics alive and undisturbed. They treat literature as representation of women's

experience and thus stress on study of texts to check women's oppression under patriarchy. Moi is also critical about the dangers of creating a separate canon of women's texts as suggested by Showalter. She feels that rather than looking at the root problem of sexual difference at both textual and institutional levels, Anglo-American criticism ends up creating another canon which could be equally dominating and authoritative.

The second section of *Sexual/Textual Politics* surveys French feminist discourse and critical practice as characterized by the works of Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva. Moi shows her leaning towards textual politics of French poststructuralists, because it is more political and intellectually more invigorating. It could be called as a movement from Anglo-American empirical criticism to French theoretical analysis. Moi feels that as compared to the Anglo-American feminism, French feminism is more visibly theoretical and draws heavily on major post-structuralists, especially Lacan and Derrida and study the textuality of language to expose its inherent instability. They propose subversion of patriarchal economy through "language" by exposing language as fluid, contingent and constantly mutable, thus refusing to adhere to the rigid binary of phallogocentric matrix. The three strongest female voices in French feminism Cixous, Kristeva and Irigaray argue that women's subjugation is rooted in the foundations of the "transcendental signified", or supposed metaphysics of presence of phallic structure and not purely in the social and political structure. According to them what we recognize as "realism" is the expression of the symbolic of patriarchal culture. So, it is only by revealing this phallogocentrism that women can think of transforming the patriarchal culture. However, they do not take into account the historical and material conditions which are equally important while analyzing the political stand of feminism.

Moi, after analyzing both the strands of feminist criticism feels that Anglo-American approach though is historical in its approach and looks at women's oppression through the social and material conditions, does not take the relevance of theoretical aspect of language into account and thus leans more towards "sexual" oppression through textual analysis. Consequently, according to Moi their approach is not political enough when considered from the perspective of feminist politics. When it comes to French feminism, she feels that though they look at the critical importance of textuality of language and accordingly suggest deconstruction through reconstructing language, their approach veers towards "essentialism" via theory and also does not take into account the historical and social conditions which are equally important while studying women's oppression. Thus, their approach could be termed as textual politics to check sexual oppression.

To conclude, Moi in a characteristic Derridean way does not aim to conclude, but instead keeps the discussion open ended by pointing out the free play of signifiers related to these two academic blocks. In other words, what Moi suggests is that the two academic blocks discussed by her viz., Anglo-American and French feminism, each has an “absent presence” of the other in it, which implies that both the approaches are incomplete without seeking each other’s absent presence in order to explain itself.

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