

Women's Writing: A Challenge to "Malestream" Determinism

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ABSTRACT

Determinism and Feminism are as diametrically opposed as sugar and spice, fire and water, and day and night. Determinism holds that human action is determined by forces other than will. Feminism implies that collective will can deconstruct the structures of production, reproduction, sexuality, and socialisation that have disadvantaged women. "Woman," born free and autonomous like the rest of God's creatures, is compelled by "malestream determinism" to become "the other." Determinism forbids any change in "Her" status, whereas Feminism includes the tool of transformational politics, which can lead to a more egalitarian social order. Determinism effectively closes the door, whereas Feminism opens new doors of opportunity. Male and female have no universal or deterministic meanings because the individual assumes a gendered identity only within a set of specific social and historical practises. Complexity politics does not imply that identities such as woman/man, black/white, Hindu/Muslim, and Western/Eastern must be abandoned. What it does is interrogate their history in order to demonstrate how the power behind these identities is exercised. The paper seeks to establish the women writing which a challenge to Malestream determinism.

Keywords: *Feminism, determinism, sexuality, biological determinism, femininity.*

A feminine text cannot fail to be more than subversive. It is volcanic, as it is written it brings about an upheaval of the old property crust, carrier of, masculine investment; there's no other way.

Helene Cixous

Determinism and Feminism are as antithetical to each other as sugar is to spice, fire to water, and day to night. Determinism implies that human action is determined by forces independent of will. Feminism implies that structuring of production, reproduction, sexuality and socialization which have put women at a disadvantage can be deconstructed by collective will. Born free and autonomous like the other of God's creatures, "woman" is compelled by "malestream determinism" to become "the other". Determinism precludes the possibility of any change in "Her" status while Feminism includes the tool of transformational politics which can create a more egalitarian social order. Determinism conclusively shuts the door while Feminism opens up new windows of opportunity.

Traditional or mainstream ("malestream" would be more appropriate) Western thought which includes a wide variety of thinkers like Plato, Aristotle, Rousseau, Sartre, Nietzsche and

Habermas has helped to create a critique of misogyny, the assumption of male superiority and centrality, "It is common knowledge among feminists that social and political theory was, and for the most part still is, written by men, for men and about men." (Rothfield 1990:94)

The belief that a woman's nature and all her possibilities are determined by her biology, specifically her reproductive biology, is the crux of western thought. Assumptions about feminine nature have not only described what that nature allegedly is, but have also prescribed and determined what feminine is and what a woman should be.

Biological determinism is best represented in the philosophy of Aristotle. In the Aristotelian scheme of things a woman's place is defined purely by her essential function which is a biological, reproductive one. Her rational capacities are inferior in comparison to those of men. "She" is the body, "He" the soul. The difference between body and soul is like the difference between animals and men, one is lower, the other higher. Hence, one is by nature slave and the other by nature master. Therefore, Aristotle concludes that the male is by nature superior and the female inferior, one rules, while the other is ruled. He equates women with slaves and children and denies them the right to participate as citizens in the political life of the Greek state. Virtue which is achieved through participation in political activity is also denied to women. But the icing on the cake is, even with respect to her essential function of reproduction, that woman plays the second fiddle. The female parent contributes only crude menstrual blood (catamenia) to the offspring. This unformed matter is then inseminated by the male parent to endow it with a soul, human capacity and form. The woman is merely a receptacle to provide material and incubation to the offspring, so here too she is inferior to the man. According to Aristotle this second class status of women is biologically determined and will brook no discussion or change.

Plato in the Republic echoes the views of his master Socrates, who said that there are no specifically female traits that would naturally exclude women from pursuits undertaken by men in the public and private sphere. The ruling class, the guardians, composed of both men and women would be given a composite education which would train them for their duties. This education was designed for the male citizens of the Greek polis and was devised to bring out the best masculine qualities. Therefore, Plato's views about women might differ from Aristotle somewhat but the world he envisaged was a man's world, and women might become its guardians but only by becoming honorary men. One has to wear pants (or the toga as Greek

men wore it); one has to ream to survive in "his" world, because "her" world does not and cannot exist.

Rousseau only confirms biological determinism by making women the guardian of sexual morals. Women are required to control their own sexual nature to help men control their reputedly more robust natural sexuality. The most pervasive ideology of the Victorian age rested Oil' the assumption that ideal womanly virtues were best expressed in the domestic vocation of wife and mother. Virginia Woolf scathingly described this "Angel in the House" thus:

She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught, she sat in it, in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own; but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others (1966:285).

Sigmund Freud's dictum "anatomy is destiny" is an unequivocal statement of biological determinism. According to him the sensible well-adjusted woman, is one who schooled herself to accept her role of passive dependency in heterosexual marriage and sought to please her husband. Freud's definitive explanation of psychosexual development was deterministic because it sought to convince women that their condition was unalterable and biologically determined.

A similar perspective operates in Judeo-Christian theology which, like Greek philosophy, is the bedrock of western thought. St Augustine asserted (a-la Aristotle) that only man is in the image of God. Women were partial beings because of their link to sensuality and nature. While men were committed to reason and authority, she was seen as different but complementary to man. In other words, women were defined not so much as for men but as in relation to men. Man is the standard of perfect model, woman is just the bits and pieces. Simone de Beauvoir summed it up with inimitable crispness:

"He is the subject; he is the Absolute - she is the other" (1975: 16).

Man became linked to rationality, civilization, to the big picture beyond small scale concerns and woman was associated with the irrational and narrow concerns of nature, biology and kin. He was all too visible; she was reduced to invisibility. So, Plato, Aristotle, Rousseau and Freud closed the lid firmly on women and told them to stay put. Tell a woman not to do something you bet your life she'll do just that. Eve had her apple and Pandora opened her box so along came Mary Wollstonecraft, Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millet and company to overturn

the "deterministic" apple cart of misogyny. They launched a frontal assault on the binary logic of western thought and questioned its oppositional categories, especially masculine/feminine, subject/object, superior/ inferior, universal/particular, human/animal.

Western thought is organized around pairs of unequally valued associations that mirror over and over again the violent hierarchy of the dualism man/woman (Beasley 1999:9).

Freud and Lacan define femininity as a castrated state, as lacking or deficient by comparison with the masculine and depict Civilization as the "Law of the Father". The school of "écriture feminine" questions the assumption that femininity can only be seen from the point of view of phallic culture and argues for other possibilities.

History, culture and society are masculine - centered discourses which exclude women from meaningful political action. Feminism is not merely an academic exercise or a fashionable fable that we air religiously on the 8th of March as Women's Day but an effective site of resistance to malestream" determinism.

A progressive feminist politics depends upon perceiving gender and indeed reality as social constructs that can be dismantled and reconstructed in new and perhaps more egalitarian ways (Finke 1992:3).

A deterministic concept of society, culture, sexuality and religion sees society as a fixed and stable entity to maintain an illusion of stasis and permanence while feminism sees all social and cultural constructs as always shifting and changing through elaborate feedback mechanisms to reorganize and reproduce social structures.

Postmodern feminism questions the concept of the autonomous all-knowing Self (male, naturally!) by saying there is no one truth. Feminine and Masculine natures are not something people are born with, they are produced through the discourses of femininity and masculinity, that is a certain way of thinking which can be decentred, questioned. Against the biological determinism of the masculine and feminine it posits multiplicity of differences that cross and recross the boundaries between masculine and feminine. Laurie A Finke defines the feminist enterprise as a politics of complexity, because it is a dialogic and polyvocal enterprise that does not see masculine/feminine as unitary and totalizing concepts but as heterogeneous cultural fields sensitive to historical contingencies. There are no universal or deterministic meanings attached to male or female because the individual assumes a gendered identity only within a set of specific social and historical practices.

Politics of complexity by no means infers those identities such as woman/man, black/white, Hindu/Muslim, Western/Eastern be abandoned. What it does however is to interrogate their history to show how the power behind these identities is exercised.

Against the monologism of determinism feministic dialogism contains a complex network of "alliances and negotiations" which many parties contend to appropriate. We have the "white feminist", "the woman of colour", the "third world woman" and the "lesbian"- a heterogeneous sisterhood whose noise has decentred the order of a homogeneous totality. Luce Irigaray suggests that female sexuality is not marked by "lack" (of a singular sex organ) but by multiplicity and abundance (1996:350). Woman's pleasure in language, like her pleasure in sexuality is not direct, linear or singular. "She" sets off in all directions leaving "him" unable to discern the coherence of any meaning. A masculine language makes a woman experience herself as fragmented, while a feminine language allows her "nearness" to herself. Women's writing presents a spectrum of many hues. Its kinetic exploration ranges from initiation to protest and finally self-discovery. If Kamala Das, Sylvia Plath, Margaret Atwood and Adrienne Rich are outrageously saucy in questioning biological determinism, Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai and Jane Austen are more subtly discreet. But like Eva and Pandora, they are all inquisitive and women writers all over the globe are asking questions because:

The real political task in a society such as ours is to criticize the workings of institutions which appear to be both neutral and independent, to criticize them in such a manner that the political violence which has always exercised itself obscurely through them will be unmasked so that we can fight them (Finke 1992: 1).

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