

WINKING AT DERRIDA:  
THE HAPPY UNION OF DECONSTRUCTION AND FEMINISM

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*"I do not wish them [women] to have power over men; but over themselves."*

Mary Wollstonecraft

Introduction

Deconstruction is consequential to a number of fields, including philosophy, politics, literary theory, feminism, cultural studies, etc. The present paper surveys the impact of deconstruction upon feminism. Feminist proponents have engaged in debates concerning the utility of deconstruction and how it can help feminists to move away the oppressing concept of 'woman' itself. Feminism can benefit significantly from examining and developing philosophical theories like deconstruction that contribute to the comprehension of subjectivity, and consequently woman's subordination. This paper does not trace the history of feminism as a set of ideas or a series of political movements, but rather the goal is to provide a sketch of some of the central uses of deconstruction that influenced feminist writings.

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Derridean deconstruction has been taken up by the feminists who have used the deconstructionist approach and the strategy of *différance* to produce terms that bypass dualism in general, and more pointedly, the feminine / masculine dualism founded on pathos / logos and other / self. Developments in the theorization of subjectivity due to feminism's recognition of class, race, gender, and sexuality have led to an adoption of poststructuralist theories including deconstruction. Poststructuralist feminists challenge phallogocentrism which seeks univocal truths. They strive to develop new ways of feminine and masculine outlook. The term Feminism was coined by the London Daily News. It first appeared in France in 1880s, Great Britain in the 1890s, and the U.S. in 1910. In fact, the history of feminism goes far back before the 18<sup>th</sup> century when women writers had been alienated from the mainstream of literature and literary criticism. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century women were denigrated for their so-called intellectual inferiority. They were silenced, but their silence was not a sign of consent, rather an indication of defying of outside forces. In spite of all these hindrances, there were a significant number of women who undertook the task of writing. Feminist writers brandished their swords to assert their individuality and autonomy. Despite all these obstacles, the female novelists, for example, developed the subjective voice in their works as the only viable form of expression of the 'subject in process'. In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century women writers who had been writing under male pseudonyms, ventured to announce their sex to the world.

One of the first significant texts that injected new life into literary theory was Annette Kolodny's *Some Notes on Defining a Feminist Literary Criticism* (1975). In this work, she first offered a short study of different types of feminist criticism and then turns to her main discussion, i.e., the study of women's writing as a separate and different category. Kolodny asserted that women's writing was idiosyncratic and different from men's writing. In other words, there was something specific for women's style and diction which fundamentally differentiates it from that of males. According to Kolodny, there were some preconceptions, or rather, some misconceptions about women, which affect our reading of women's writing, e.g., 'to be a human is to be a male', or 'a woman is an imperfect man' or 'a woman is incapable of being a critic or philosopher'. It was believed that women were more emotional than men, hence, their being too susceptible to sensibility and too fragile to think clearly. This can be traced back to Aristotle, who proposed that a female is female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities. It is reasonable to abandon all these false preconceptions and presuppositions about women's writing since it would be an incomplete treatment of criticism if we exclude feminist critics from criticism. To be a critic, a woman has to destroy the established stereotypes made by male-oriented literary theory. Women writers had before them the enormous task of defying their marginality in literary theory. This is also the rebellion of the female consciousness against the negative male images of female identity and experience. To assess women's writings, we must deconstruct the number of preconceptions inherent in a literary canon dominated by male beliefs and male writers.

The theory of deconstruction has been used most notably by the feminists, but there is not a fixed formula for how they affect each other because they continually

redefine one another. Both feminism and deconstruction point out that “there is no thematic to the category of ‘woman’” (Diane, 20001, p. 208). Derrida’s seminal works *Of Grammatology* (1976) and *Writing and Difference* (1978) have influenced feminist deconstructive philosophy. One typical form of deconstructive reading is the critique of binary oppositions or the criticism of dichotomous thought. A central deconstructive argument holds that in all the classic dualities of Western thought one term is privileged or central over the other. The privileged term is the one that most associated with phallus and logos. In his work *Of Grammatology* (1976), Derrida argues that the first term is privileged because it is conceived as original, authentic, central, and superior while the other is considered as peripheral, secondary or derivative. Since Aristotle, Western thought has a tendency to organize things in terms of binary oppositions. Derrida states that these oppositions are not natural but a “... violent hierarchy. One of the two terms govern the other (axiologically, logically, etc.), or has the upper hand” (Derrida, 1981a, p. 41). Significantly, the first term in these binaries is privileged because it presents the unified and self-identical. The second term is subordinate and is defined as unformed, transforming and chaotic; it represents the ‘Other’ and absence. Derrida believes that the male side of the opposition is privileged; therefore, the opposition is not equal since woman is considered to be inferior to man. To focus on man’s right would be a lopsided view of deconstruction, one that does not match his theory of deconstruction. He refutes the patient-doctor relationship in which the doctor has power and the patient is subordinate.

In terms of feminist struggles, deconstruction offers feminism a tool for analyzing theory, a new way of thinking about the world, i.e., challenging binary thinking, and

through these processes a way of imaging a future that contains the feminine as well as the masculine. Deconstruction demonstrates that these oppositions are unstable, reversible, and mutually dependent on one another. Hence, deconstructive approach plays an important role in demonstrating that there can be no universal and privileged meanings and values in literary traditions. Derrida seeks to move beyond the constraints of binaries. He does not seek to reverse the hierarchies implied in binary pairs to favor feminine over masculine. Rather deconstruction wants to erase the boundaries between oppositions, hence shows that the values and order implied by the oppositions are not rigid. The entire structure of binary oppositions becomes particularly unstable, and unravels in an infinite play in the so-called undecidables. To quote Derrida, “To deconstruct the opposition, first of all, is to overturn the hierarchy at a given moment” (Derrida, 1981a, p. 41).

Helene Cixous uses Derridean deconstruction to critique the psychoanalytic theories of Freud and Lacan as they pertain to gender. In *Sorties* (1975), Cixous claims that the series of binary oppositions on which Western culture is founded finally resolve into the primary oppositions of man / woman. Furthermore, the opposition is hierarchical since the male side of the opposition is privileged. In psychoanalytic theory, man is the universal subject and woman is defined as the ‘lack of penis’. Luce Irigaray maintains that Freud’s theory of penis envy is a clear indication that it is men who badly require the idea of castration to bolster their psychic and sexual identity. Woman represents the negative or inferior pole, for example, she is submissive, emotional, sympathetic, supportive, subservient, and powerless whereas the male is strong, powerful, and the ruler of the house. It is considered a benefit to be rational and a disadvantage to be overly emotional. Since men are seen to be rational whereas women emotional, the former is

often placed at a higher position in the hierarchy of human society. In *Sorties* (1975), Cixous does not believe in simply privileging the feminine pole because this would reassert the whole principle of opposition. This is why she declares herself to be opposed to feminism. She claims that women are inherently more bisexual than men who are rigidly channeled into phallus-centered heterosexuality. Hence, the purpose of deconstruction is first to locate the determining infrastructure and second, to reverse the hierarchical binary that keeps their infrastructure in place and finally, to place the binary by introducing a new hinge term. As a theoretical exercise, feminism can use deconstruction as a strategy to reverse the binary man / woman in order to highlight the exclusion, dependence, and violence necessary to keep that binary in place. As Barbara Johnson notes, the deconstruction “ of a binary opposition is....not an annihilation of all values or differences, it is an attempt to follow the subtle, powerful effects of differences already at work within the illusion of a binary opposition” (Johnson, 1980, p. xii). Through the application of deconstruction, Derrida employs a tactic of decentring; destabilizing the primary terms so that the secondary term temporarily overthrows the hierarchy.

Derrida maintains that Western metaphysics is phallogocentric. He insists that metaphors for woman have formed or produced the very conditions of knowledge, and how we come to experience meaning. For Derrida, deconstruction of phallogocentrism inevitably leads to ‘woman’. Accordingly, ‘woman’ is one of Derrida’s undecidables like *différance*, trace, hymen, supplement, and the like because she cannot be fixed in the binary system on which the metaphysics of presence relies. When Derrida uses the word ‘woman’ he is referring to the multiple meanings associated with feminine or woman, not

real woman as such. Clearly, he does not claim that real woman does not exist, but that 'woman' does not have a predetermined fixed essence. To Derrida, woman acts as a metaphor of *différance* or a metaphor which cannot be determined or defined. Like *différance*, woman as a metaphor is used as a tool for subverting logocentrism and disrupting phallogocentrism. The phallus is a signifier for logos of language and ultimately defines one's position as a masculine male a feminine female in the symbolic order, but "by its presence or absence the penis becomes the defining characteristic of both sexes" (Grosz, 1990c, p.116). Like Derrida, Irigaray maintains that logo is phallogocentric. She regards the "logic which has dominated the West since the Greeks" as concentrated on "this [phallic] kind of unity" (Irigaray, 1980, p.101). Thus, she denies Western culture as one that "claims to enumerate everything cipher everything by units, inventory everything by individualities" (Irigaray, 1980, p. 101). Both Derrida and Irigaray claim that all Western frameworks are premised on logocentrism. Logocentric thinking strives to repress the contingency and instability of meaning. Irigaray stresses that only by challenging logocentrism can we radically decentre established meanings. As a result, the goal for feminism is to displace phallogocentrism, not to replace one dominant discourse with another.

Western philosophy is grounded on metaphysics of presence where language is seen to be a neutral and transparent way of expressing philosophical truths. For Derrida, language is not neutral rather it produces effects. By deconstructing texts, Derrida is able to show the constant play within language. Ferdinand de Saussure in *Course in General Linguistics* (1916) defines language as a "system of signs". He argues that signs are arbitrary and conventional and each sign is defined not by some essential property, but by

the differences that distinguish it from other signs. He holds, “in language there are only differences without positive terms” (Saussure, 1916, p. 120). Like Saussure, Derrida considers language as a system of differences. He asserts that two terms cannot exist without reference to the other, and meaning in language differs continuously in relation to other meanings. His style of writing, especially in relation to the concept of *différance* disrupts binary thinking and philosophy’s quest for unitary truth. For feminism, *différance* offers a way of thinking sexual *différance* that does not deny differences, but at the same time does not create false hierarchies. Like Derrida, Irigaray claims that the term woman is trapped inside metaphysics of presence where definition is only possible with reference to man. The question that dominates Irigaray’s idea is how to imagine the feminism outside of a masculine symbolic order beyond binaries. Her work on new ways of explaining the symbolic order and making a space for feminine subjectivity is very important. She rejects Lacan’s model of the symbolic order which positions femininity as lack, rather she inclines towards a model that recognizes feminine alterity. According to Jacques Lacan, subjectivity requires language, and language is masculine grounded in the phallus as universal signifier. The problem is that women are given the same words men are given, i.e. masculine words. Lacking feminine words, women must babble or remain silent within the symbolic order.

Irigaray’s deconstructive approach leads her to an understanding of the symbolic order which explains man’s violence to woman. Language is seen as man- made or at least man-centered and it is the task of the feminists to overthrow that order and reconstruct one suitable to women. What Irigaray suggests is that in order to create female identity and female subjectivity, women must have a sociality among themselves

and a language of their own. Both Derrida and Irigaray view language as the vehicle of changing the way in which subjects are coded as male or female. Helen Cixous and Irigaray focus on language as the key to understand the 'feminism' beyond masculine frameworks. According to Kristeva, "these women [referring to the theorists like Irigaray and Cixous] seek to give a language to the intrasubjective and corporal experiences left mute by culture in the past" (Kristeva, 1986, p. 194).

Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1969) argues that the kind of inequality found between men and women has its origin in culture which has led to a kind of politics whereby one sex manages to control the other. The objective of emancipating women from their endless subordination is to bring them "closer to humanity". According to early liberal feminists like Harriet Taylor and Mary Wollstonecraft, what makes human is the capacity to reason or be rational. These feminists argue that women's inferiority is not innate or inevitable, but as a consequence of exclusion, for instance, being deprived access to education and economic independence. In *A Vindication of Rights of Woman* (1792), Wollstonecraft vehemently defends females as full human beings, who for several reasons deserve the same education that men receive. She contends that society will degenerate without educated women, particularly because mothers are the primary educators of young children. She holds that the myth that woman "was created to be the toy of man, must be repudiated before a real change in her condition is gained permanently" (Wollstonecraft, 1975, p. 28). Instead of viewing women as ornaments to society or property to be traded in marriage, Wollstonecraft maintains that they are human beings deserving the same fundamental rights as men. She emphasizes that they should not be constrained by or made slaves to their bodies or their sexual feelings.

Depriving woman of her autonomy and selfhood have been not only connived at but even sanctioned by religious, metaphysical and epistemological traditions, which have reinforced the efforts of the secular institutions to perpetuate the myth of woman's lack of self. The Holy Bible prescribes a life of total submission and servitude for woman. One of Wollstonecraft's attacks is on a religion which has been instrumental in depriving women of equal rights with men and reducing them to the plane of social nonentities. Women are treated as the possessions either of their fathers or husbands not as human beings. They are identified in relation to a man in position of authority: the father, the husband. Men have been more anxious to make of women alluring mistresses than rational wives.

According to Irigaray, the problem for women today is achieving identity within a male demarcated scheme. Her influential essay *This Sex Which is Not One* (1980) signals the serious yet playful direction of her deconstructing of female identity within a phallogocentric culture- this sex, i.e., the feminine which is not a sex because there is only one and it is masculine - signifies the presence or absence of the phallus, and not one, i.e., unified and defined by phallic wholeness, but rather multiple, fluid, and excessive. That is why feminist critics embrace pluralism in their literary methods and theories. Pluralism is literally a belief in more than one entity or meaning, but its literary or connotative meaning suggests drawing on various styles and motifs in eclectic compositions. It also suggests that there is no one unique style in writing or creating a literary work. The object of pluralism is to make use of multiple critical approaches and to get a thorough appreciation of the variety of meaning which can be prevented in a single text. Annette Kolodny, in her article *Dancing through the Minefield* (1989), holds

that “only by employing plurality of methods we will protect ourselves from the temptation of oversimplifying any text” (Kolodny, 1989, p. 161). She suggests that we must look at what makes up our “aesthetic judgment” and these judgments shape our world. She utters that pluralism still allows for some disagreements because it opens up the idea that different readings are possible. Like deconstruction, feminist literary theory draws our attention to the infinite variations of the same text in its interpretations.

In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), Mary Wollstonecraft criticizes against the way women act in society, their use of beauty to court males and other general vanity. Women, due to their enslaving biology, find themselves caught in a fate they have been trying to escape in vain. The mere thought that woman is born with ovaries and uterus goes a long way in deciding the role she is assigned in men’s world. As she maintains, “The woman who has only been taught to please will soon find that her charms...can not have much effect on her husband. Will she then have sufficient native energy to look into herself for comfort, and activate her dormant faculties or is it more rational to expect that she will try to please other men?”(Wollstonecraft, 1792, p. 195). Simone de Beauvoir observes, “Women make up about one half of humanity yet, they are the other in a totality of which the two components are necessary to one another” (de Beauvoir, 1953, p. 20). The publication of *The Second Sex* changed the way the world looked at women and their subjectivity. It urged Feminism to be skeptical of any fixed or predetermined constructions of subjectivity. This is referred to as ‘deconstruction feminism’. Women share common characteristics which are universal. Based on these similarities, it is hence deemed to be sufficient to speak on behalf of all women. The subject that is invoked through an equality discourse is a ‘human’ subject rather than a

masculine or feminine subject. Unfortunately, it is a humanist subject which is marked by masculine or patriarchal culture in such a way as to limit or exclude possibilities of exploring feminine ways of being. It is why many feminist theorists have critiqued humanism on the grounds that it maintains a hierarchical distinction between nature and human, and that it posits 'man' as completely in control of his own actions and behaviors without acknowledging the structural aspects of inequality such as race, gender, or class. While the masculine subject denies or excludes racial, sexual and other differences, deconstruction helps articulate the claim that feminist struggle is meant not only to assert identity to women, but also to assert differences from men. It can help feminism understand subjectivity and enhance feminist practice.

As women have been forced to live according to the wishes, expectations and standards of men, they have completely forgotten to be their own selves. They over centuries have been treated as "the other" of men. Simon de Beauvoir, in her book *The Second Sex* (1988), powerfully advances her argument that woman has been trapped in her own body. The value of women is measured directly in proportion to their ability to make themselves attractive to and wanted by men. She draws a clear line between sex and gender and goes to argue that if sex is biological, gender is psychological, and such as, as she says, "one is not born, but becomes a woman"(de Beauvoir, 1988, p. 267). Her analysis focuses on the Hegelian concept of the "Other". Man occupies the role of the self, the subject; woman is the object, the "Other". Man is essential, absolute, and transcendent. She is inessential, incomplete, and mentally deficient. She has value as a sexual partner but not as an independent entity. In defining woman exclusively as "Other", man is effectively denying her humanity as well. Beauvoir premises her

understanding of women's inferior status and marginalized existence on the ontological view that humans are ineluctably trapped in their bodies. In *The Second Sex*, she indicates how women historically have been defined, and have allowed themselves to be defined as the "Other" in a reciprocal relation, as the other sex, subordinate to the male. She argues that in a sexist society, man is the universal and woman is the particular, he is the One, she is the "Other". Beauvoir bases her idea of the "Other" on Hegel's account of the master-slave dialectic. Instead of the terms master and slave, she uses the terms "subject" and "other". The Subject is the absolute Man and the "Other" is the inessential Woman. She believes that "Others" are not produced; they are constructed. In the final chapter of her work, de Beauvoir reiterates the controversial claim that woman's situation is not a result of her character. Rather, her character is a result of her situation.

To recapitulate: deconstruction means interpreting a text by means of exposing what is usually suppressed. It focuses upon searching what is absent rather than what is present, just as feminism does. Derridean deconstruction challenges binary system, not by replacing unitary meaning for another, but by transforming terms to make visible their multiple meanings. Derrida argues that binary oppositions are subjective and constantly changing; therefore they will eventually overlap and begin to contradict one another. He is of the idea that meaning of words are not in the words themselves, but in the differences between them. Derrida's notion of undecidability rests on his notion of difference and *différance*. Essentially, he argues that it is in the nature of language to produce meaning only with reference to other meanings against which it takes on its own significance. Thus, we can never establish stable meanings by attempting correspondence between language and the world addressed by language. Instead, meaning is the result of

differential significances that we attach to words. In Derridean view, the only language available is the logocentric, phallogocentric, and binary language. He believed that the symbolic order can be weakened by providing suppressed alternative interpretation of texts. He coined the term *différance* to describe the ineliminable gap (irreducible otherness) between reality and language that confounds us. Derrida's *différance* model also maintains that women are equal to men but different. Though women have the same status to men as human beings, they have their own identity and they are different from men. To dismantle the notion of the "Other", Derrida deconstructs the word "woman" from a subordinate association and reconstructs it through proving that women do not need to be rationalized by male dominance. He acknowledges that it is human tendency to think in opposites, but instead of the opposite of man, to him it is non-man, not woman. Derrida believed that we should liberate our thoughts from binary oppositions such as male / female, nature / nurture, speech / writing, and so forth. His rejection of a single truth is important to an understanding of postmodern feminism. There is a refusal of an essential nature of women, of one way to be a woman. His writings can uncover how race and gender can be thought differently. Derrida argues that the two oppositions, male and female, are dependent upon one another and woman is not a supplement to man since what is complete in itself cannot be added to. In sum, he is more interested in the margins since like marginalized women, for Derrida margins are not peripheral but central.

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