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Hélène Cixous

Hélène Cixous, the Jewish-Algerian-French writer, born on 5th June 1937 in Oran, Algeria is a professor, French feminist writer, poet, playwright, philosopher, literary critic and rhetorician. However her reputation rests largely on her contributions as a feminist literary theorist, who has established through her writings that literature and philosophy are both institutions that perpetuate patriarchal domination.

Cixous' feminist essay 'Le Rire de la Méduse' originally written in French in 1975 was translated into English as 'The Laugh of the Medusa' in 1976 by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen. 'The Laugh of the Medusa' has a place of importance in the world of feminist literary theory as a ground-breaking essay, that declared what Cixous called *Écriture féminine*, a distinctive style of writing for women and by women. She is the greatest representative of the *Écriture féminine* who taught women how to liberate themselves from patriarchy through writing.

Summary

Cixous's essay 'The Laugh of the Medusa' opens with an exhortation to women "to write herself". She had been forcibly separated from her body and now it is up to her to reclaim the body that is her own and free herself from the shackles of patriarchy.

The past should no longer be allowed to determine the future though the effects may still remain. But reiterating and repeating the past will only serve to make them strong enough to control the future. To prevent that women should take to writing and liberate themselves from those who have been keeping them in the dark. They should write about the "infinite richness of their individual constitution". Her own private world is where she does a "passionate and precise interrogation of her heterogeneity", the space where "beauty will no longer be forbidden".

It is important for women to write and proclaim their unique empire and their new desires that are aesthetically superior to any artwork created by man. Cixous admits that she had been ashamed herself about opening up about her deepest desires. Many a woman has accused herself of being a monster or sick horrified by the tumult of her own sexuality. She emphasizes again that writing is not just the prerogative of great men alone, and that woman need not feel guilty about entering the territory of writing hitherto monopolized by men.

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The truth is that men are intimidated by female-sexed texts. The male-centred world has always been making efforts to keep them “frigidified” by imprisoning their “ill-mannered” bodies from asserting themselves. They have been trained to internalize “the horror of the dark” by leading them to believe that their sexuality is dark and black like the Dark Continent Africa. The greatest crime men have committed against women is that they have led women to hate themselves and be their own enemies. They have made women anti-narcissists with immense strength working against themselves in favour of the virile needs of men. This should not be allowed to continue. It is time to free the “New Woman” from the “Old” and this liberation can be facilitated only through writing. There has not been any writing that inscribes femininity. Not only has the number of woman writers been ridiculously small, but also the little work done so far towards that end has not been in any way different from masculine writing. By masculine writing she means the kind that either has no place for women or simply something that represents women as “sensitive, intuitive and dreamy”. In other words they are typical classic representations of women that bear no resemblance to the ‘New Woman’.

Helene Cixous asserts that writing has been an activity driven by a libidinal and cultural economy. And as women have always been denied the opportunity to speak, writing/language has become a perfect locus of female oppression. It is important for men to keep her silenced because otherwise their writings would become springboards for subversive thought paving way for social and cultural transformation.

Pointing finger at the phallogocentric tradition, Cixous says that it has always been self-admiring, self-stimulating and self-congratulatory. There have been few exceptions like some poets who are capable of going against tradition and envisage strong women, “impossible” subject, untenable in a real social framework”. The appearance of such women would bring on a revolution with power to change the apparently immutable male bastion. But only poets have done this, and never the novelists. Hence women have to invent a new insurgent writing which will allow her to carry out the transformations at two inseparable levels.

1. Individually: Writing herself to reclaim the body that has been forcibly taken away from her. She has to write to make her body heard and realize the relation of the body to her sexuality. She has always been occupying the space reserved for the ‘guilty’; “guilty of everything, guilty at every turn: for having desires, for not having any; for being frigid, for not being “too hot”...” She has to kill the false woman in her that had been a slave of the dominant male.

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2. Seizing the occasion to speak: Her presence in history has been based on her suppression. She has been shy of speaking up, out of fear of transgression. Taking up the challenge of speech, previously controlled by the phallus, will ensure a place for her not in the realm of silence. Allow the body to speak and it speaks the language of truth.

Cixous believed that a woman's speech has the power to move people. It is the power of "the first music from the first voice of love which is alive in every woman"; the power of the mother's milk. Cixous exhortation that woman must write their bodies in white ink or mother's milk has led to criticisms by theorists like Toril Moi, and Elaine Showalter, who have expressed fear that Cixous has reduced a woman to her body and her writing to a maternal babble denying its own status as a "cultural construct" and sustains the mythology of the "eternal feminine".

Cixous's celebration of motherhood in writing is that a distinctive feminine discourse (*écriture féminine*) stems from the female body, the maternal body. It is the body that infuses her language with the creative power. In other words, motherhood or reunion with the maternal body become a catalyst for writing. A woman's need to write is a biological drive much like her maternal instincts. This cannot be accomplished without mastering her body that has been completely seized and misinterpreted by masculine rhetoric. It is her bodily experiences that will give rise to 'écriture féminine' that will in turn subvert phallogocentric discourse and enable them to reclaim their voice and bodies.

Cixous goes on to say that a feminine practice of writing does exist, though it may be impossible to theorize it. It means that such a practice would be beyond the purview of a phallogocentric discourse and operates in areas which lie outside the territorial boundaries of masculine "philosophico- theoretical" rule. Only those who are bold enough to break the automatism or controls manipulating their actions, can initiate the creation of a feminist practice of writing. Thus the changes are most likely to happen in areas along the margins far removed from the centre which continue to remain bound by the authority of a phallogocentric system.

Very rarely has there been writing that inscribes femininity. People have been reluctant all along to admit or accept the distinction between feminine and masculine writing. In this context it is important to bear these points in mind

1. Sexual opposition has always been to ensure conformity to masculine standards in aspects that include writing. Western literary culture is entrapped in a phallogocentric mode, the 'logical logos. Writing against

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this mode would destroy the binaries of masculine/feminine and logic/illogic. But this opposition is only about setting limits. The limits will be crossed and then it will give rise to a body of literary works that will bring femininity into writing, the effects of which will be impossible to disregard. Therefore a woman must write and forge for herself the anti-logos weapon to undermine the cultural privilege of phallogentrism.

2. It is mainly because of ignorance that the possibility of a distinction between masculine and feminine writing is rejected outright. Writing was believed to be something that negates sexual difference. The liberation ideology is based on the celebration of a feminine difference which can de-stabilize sexual opposition that favours man. Cixous compares the experience of a woman in the masculine to the experience of a woman seeking the pleasures of male sexuality with an ineffectual paper penis.

Derridean influence is apparent in the section where Cixous asserts that writing actually works between the two binaries of masculine/feminine, logic/illogic. The idea of the “in-between” is a textual and theoretical feature of Derrida’s writings. The binaries are to be replaced with a fluid, interplay of desires. The in-between suggest the human subject whose identity is fluid and ever changing. It is important to recognize the distinction. Only then the process of traversing and exploding its terms can be initiated which will eventually destabilize the opposition. It is a whole and not just a part of something. Bringing femininity into writing is not the expulsion of the masculine or bringing about an end or death.

The concept of bisexuality is suppressed or subdued under the concepts of

1. castration anxiety (fear of loss of penis – Freud’s psychoanalytic theory)
2. the fantasy of the ‘total’ being as being the state of perfection with the coming together of two halves.

It is this bisexuality that can eliminate the difference which is believed to have come into being due to the loss of the penis. The dread of losing it is the cause of anxiety. The traditional idea was to treat bisexuality as a neutrality and that engendered the fear of lacking (castration). Cixous contrasts this traditional idea with a new kind of bisexuality that identify oneself as having sexual orientation towards the two sexes. In that aspect a woman is bisexual whereas man cannot be so without losing his phallogentric masculine identity. A woman’s writing is also bisexual for she writes to both men and women. To elaborate, the traditional bisexuality which is self-effacing equates with neutrality or as being neither here or there.

Against there is another type of bisexuality, not encoded by a phallogentric representation and hence the locus of one’s erotic universe. This is the kind of bisexuality that accepts orientation towards both sexes in its various manifestations. According to Cixous, feminine writing is a manifestation of desire outside of

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hetero-normative convention. It blurs all distinctions to make way for an erotic scripture that would subvert the binary opposition and offer a multiplication of sites of bodily pleasure. Cixous rejects the limitations inherent in being one or the other and argues for multiplicity. She defines bisexuality as the multiplication of the effects of the inscription of desire, referring to the pleasures of choosing a broader mode of sexual expression. As against the bipolarity of sexes, she suggests bimodality where males and females are identifiable groups who have areas that also overlap and the virtues of each are celebrated. In other words the traits attributed to each sex are present in both.

The concept of 'vatic sexuality' demonstrates Cixous's zeal to shake up rigid oppositional terms. Traditional bisexuality denies sexual difference by merging two halves into a fantasy of a total being. Vatic sexuality does not annul differences, but stirs them up and increases their number. This is in opposition with the self-effacing merger type of bisexuality. Referring once again to Freud's theory of Psychoanalysis, Cixous admits her being always overshadowed by the overwhelming power of the phallic symbol which as a woman she could never wield. Yet man who is supposed to brandish this symbol of power lives in constant anxiety and fear of castration.

In this essay, Cixous makes an ironical statement about Lacan's concept. According to Lacan language acquisition begins when the child's imaginary (Pre-Oedipal phase) joint identity with the mother is destroyed with the appearance of the father. The child learns to say 'I am' as distinguished from 'he is'. In Lacan's theory phallus does not refer to a specific attribute of man, but refers symbolically to the law binding on everyone.

The Phallogocentric system of Lacan needs to be deconstructed and new strategies devised for the expression of the relation between language and female bodies. *L'écriture féminine* (feminine writing) is about the unconscious, the repressed female sexuality. Women should find their own sexuality, their bodies must be heard. Once they become active subjects the structure of language will change. And the language that will evolve would be a deconstructive language. Cixous urges women not to identify themselves in relation to man. Helene Cixous asserts the need to give form to such a feminine movement. She also needs to destroy the prison of sexual impropriety.

Derrida accuses Lacan of being both phallogocentric (phallus as the centre of the symbolic order) and Logocentric. Phallogocentrism treats the phallus as the source or origin of language). Cixous and post-structural feminists critique this concept for its subordination of the feminine to the masculine. It is in

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opposition to Freud's binaries of possession and lack, that Cixous says that the new woman is not obliged to reinstate the supremacy of the religion of the father. Molly Bloom of the James Joyce's 'Ulysses' has Penelope as her mythical counterpart. "I said yes, I will yes" is her soliloquy that forms the 18th and final episode of Ulysses. This Penelope episode illustrates the emotional complexity of marriage and fidelity. The 'yes' is the female word suggesting acquiescence and surrender. Molly's sexual associations contrast with Penelope's fidelity to her long-absent husband that makes her an emblematic of the ideal woman. Like Penelope and Ariadne, she has to spin the textual thread that will lead her to salvation. The writing process is a process of transformation. To weave her own stories she must return to the patriarchal canon and unearth the narratives of the past that keep her silenced and captive. Death is the transformation and not the end. In undoing the work of death she learns to exult in her creativity. In other words writing has the capacity to undo the silence and death of trauma and bring it to light and life. She feels liberated to follow diverse routes with lots of encounters and transformations. She will imbibe the energy from a continuous process of mutual exchange. This idea is contrary to what Cixous propounds in the essay about the necessity of women's agency in writing and history. The life giving transformative imagination are true of men and women alike. But with women it is not sufficiently acknowledged.

Cixous accuses Freud of a form of gender apartheid and of perpetuating a myth about the impenetrable nature of the female conscious. Freud's imaginary mapping of the female sexuality and the clumsy manner in which he tries to repress femininity makes his psychoanalysis no different from the other human sciences- just reproducing the masculine view. The female unconscious remains untapped and unmapped by psychoanalytical theory as women have been made to believe that it was too dark an area to be traversed and explored. They are even made to believe that it is the white continent that interests them. In other words this is as perceived by the gaze of the male colonial cartographer and explorer.

Cixous's writing despite her outward endorsement of the idea of multiple women is caught in the desire to totalize the History of the Woman and is based on a deeply Eurocentric consensus on African darkness. She presents Freud's Dark Continent as a masculine construct. Speaking about the phallogocentric structures inherent in the language, Cixous asserts that women are silenced. Their sex is an abyss, a mysterious dark room, an unexplored yet claimed country.

The phrase Medusa and the abyss indicate the choices for a woman in phallic discourse. The choice between the silence of castration and the silence of decapitation. She is always locked in silence because

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either she speaks in a language that is not her own or her words are not received by a man's ears which can hear only when they speak in the masculine.

Cixous reminds us of the patriarchal nature of the myth and the fact that it articulates a falsehood. She does so with reference to the sirens of mythology. The idea that sirens were female enchantresses enticing men in order to drain all the vigour is a masculine construction. All women must liberate themselves from this absurdity and stop listening. History is just a story that can be changed if serious efforts are taken to alter it.

Castration is again a typically phallogocentric symbolism, with female genitals symbolizing the absence of something that men possess. The female signifies lack against male presence and substance. Here Cixous reclaims the myth creating a laughing Medusa who refuses the role she has been consigned by patriarchy.

According to men, femininity is synonymous with death. Cixous cites Genet as one of her three exemplars of *écriture féminine* and refers to the novel 'Pompes Funébres' (translated Funeral rites) a 1948 novel by Jean Genet. For Cixous '*écriture féminine*' is not only a prerogative of female writers, but is also a mode of writing that has been employed by male authors such as James Joyce and Jean Genet. Cixous has named Genet as one of a small number of French authors in whose work "femininity" is inscribed.

Femininity has not yet been entirely explained by anyone. A lot still needs to be written about the infinite and mobile complexity of sexuality, eroticism, arousals and a zillion other feelings related to the awakening and discovery of one's body. The *écriture féminine* will evolve only when this happens and that happens when the censors and controls are smashed to transform the traditional masculine mother tongue to one that would echo or reverberate with more than one language.

We have been taught to be ashamed of our own bodies. The idea of heterosexuality has been so ingrained in our minds to make us victims of the old fool's game. Cixous urges women to steal their voices back from the men, to ignite their mouths, impregnate their words and rise high without the phallogocentric structures of men. To do this women must denounce the masculine language which is the father tongue. Cixous is optimistic about women's ability to reclaim their right to speak and write in the feminine style. To be more effective the style must take on an unconventional form. By abandoning the linear and orderly characteristics associated with traditional masculine style, Cixous uses the phallogocentric language to her advantage. And when the 'repressed' comes back to reclaim themselves, it will happen with such

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force and destructiveness as to restore the female principle in our society and culture. The end of the phallic period could either be a total annihilation of women or taken up high to a violent brilliance. It had been the lot of women to stay muted all along engaging themselves in silent rebellions from a world of dreams.

But there was great power in their fragility. Instead of succumbing they could reserve the energies. Without ending it all they took over their gorgeous bodies and made Freud succumb to the explosions or the eruptive reactions against the systematic suppression of expression. When the woman throws down the seven veils of modesty and emerges forth in all her shockingly honest self, laying bare her passion and her carnal desires, it is the mosaic statue of phallogocentric authority that is shattered. The bodily revolt that Cixous evokes pierces like an arrow and it is led by none other than the women who were merely supplicants in the past. But now they are the ones to pave the way for the new woman to emerge.

In this context Cixous makes mention of Freud's well known patient Dora, a girl whose inexplicable cough led Freud to pursue the psychological causes of her symptoms. She developed a nervous cough and lost her voice, the reason being her father's affair with Fran K, whose husband Herr K too had tried to make several advances to her. Freud attributed the cough to her repressed anxieties.

In body: Cixous analyses the role the female body and sexuality play in the context of women's writing. The female body is considered a key for women to resist masculine thinking. For a long time she had been passively subjecting herself to all kinds of persecution. They have tried to speak, but failed. It is important to overcome the fear. Cixous urges women to not fear the language thinking that it belongs to men. If she has always been functioning within the masculine discourse, it's time she broke herself free and invented a language that will enable her to gush forth with ease.

Cixous argues that flying is a woman's gesture. Flying also means stealing away. Women's writing/flying is a deliberate transgression of accepted verbal and physical boundaries. Only women know what it means to be caged and trapped in an alien territory.

A true feminine text is more than subversive. It not only overthrows an established order, but like a volcano, it will bring about an upheaval of the traditional order and shatter the false truth with laughter triumphantly. She would blaze her trail and make a path breaking effort towards achieving this. The history that witnessed the death of many a woman has enlightened them to see truth earlier than men. She realizes the meaninglessness of propriety and the reducing frugality in the conjugal relation that

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offers her little in the deal. She is not petrified or restricted. This new female subject goes adventuring without the masculine temerity into anonymity. She is fearless and there is no castration anxiety. Cixous berates Nietzsche for thinking that women are selfish and gives only to take, which is actually an attribute of men. Nietzsche's name is often seen as synonymous with the worst sort of misogyny- a kind of unapologetically aggressive "écriture masculine".

Cixous also talks about the immense capacity of women to 'deappropriate'. Deappropriation is indifference to possession- a form of renunciation- a willingness to relate to the world without imposing conditions of ownership. It constitutes an ethics of care that requires an 'ethos' other than that of ownership.

In the realm of maternal feminine there is no phallus to centre identity. Helen Cixous elaborates further the argument that women are not focused on just one object. She is countering Freud's theory of penis envy. The female libido is not restricted and therefore is more restricted than male sexuality. She is capable of losing a part of herself without losing her selfhood or identity. Her liberation will unsettle the power relations.

Cixous is actually speaking in highly metaphorical terms and psychoanalytical terminology. She suggests a "cosmic" superiority in women's sexuality in comparison to phallic single-mindedness. She is a moving cosmos traversed or guided by libidinal drives not always centred on the male norm or the phallus. The subject of female sexuality has always been repressed by men and should therefore be a starting point for a new female discourse.

Her appeal to find a language "that can speak the body" means that women have to contemplate their relationship to their body. They should orient towards the multiple sexual impulses of their body to find a liberating way of writing. The language thus invented would not be something that limits or contains. She reiterates the multiplicity of the sexual impulses which is "the wonder of being several". By allowing the expression of id, she gets transformed and it is this gift of alterability that enables her to return to her primitive and instinctual part of the mind that holds her sexual drives, she derives pleasure.

Cixous says that feminine empowerment and expression in writing is linked to water and fluidity in contrast to the solidity of the symbolic order. She calls for the birth of the author through the text. The new woman will come to life when the voices repressed so far become loud and clear in her writings. The language of women is more fluid and immediate. There is no distinction of the symbolic, imaginary or real order. Her writings create a feminine vocal sphere centred on female erotogeneity. Cixous calls for

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women to return to their bodies in writing the feminine, to write their torrential sensations, their exceptional and multiple erotogeneity.

According to Cixous, Freud laid the ground work for an unjustifiable biological discrimination and bias against women. According to Freud the women's sexuality is characterized by a longing for the penis. If men need to believe that women are holes fringed with desire for penises, that's their business. Women assure men that their penises are still there. Cixous also criticizes Freudian nuclear family, which she sees as generating the ideas of castration and lack that form the basis for ideas of the feminine in Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis. She wants to break up these "old circuits" so that the family formations upholding phallogocentric symbolic will not be recreated every time a child is born. The family system is just as limiting and oppressive to men as to women and that it needs to be "demater-paternalized".

Cixous offers an apt metaphor for artistic creation in that the child is the other, the creation from parents, without the violence, the loss, the death of those who have given it life. Addressing women she says that becoming pregnant with the child is not the only way of "living one's pregnancy" and that there are many ways to have such a connection in life, leaving the idea open for artistic creation fulfilling the desire to live one's pregnancy. This desire can be described as a yearning to give birth to something with which they can develop an intense relation and nurture and guide to fruition.

Cixous urges women not to hold back her drives or instincts. She attacks the defenders of the theory – "the sacrosanct yes men of concept, enthroners of the phallus". The attack is directed against the Lacanians and the Althusserians. As per Lacan's theory of lack, the women desire for the masculine body does not initiate from the body itself, but from the lacking of penis. Cixous critiques the interpretation saying that her personal desire of the other is for the other. The woman's inexhaustible and forever present desire does not represent a lack. She has no anxiety about castration either.

Cixous is harshly critical of the masculine phallogocentric values propounded by Freud and Lacan. In a brief and pithy scene, Cixous presents a mockery of the Lacanian drama of lack. Cixous says that woman writers and theorists are still vulnerable to the "new old men". A woman who idolizes the masculine sex is the woman of yesterday who is still preserved in the darkness of the past or fallaciously resurrected by naive moral thinking. But these women are unfortunately still large in number. The new women are still

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subjected to “discipline” by the “cops of the signifier”. Freud considered that at the “phallic stage” of early childhood development, children attribute possession of a penis to the mother.

Other love: Cixous never proposed to dispose of sexual difference in her definition of a feminine practice of writing. Neither does she denigrate masculinity which is itself a part of writing. Accepting the difference, Cixous speaks about the desire to seek the other. There is no jealousy, or any ulterior design. There is no fear or subservience to the phallus. There is no commerce or trade in love, in the sense that it does not expect anything in return. Cixous calls it an economy that cannot be put in economic terms. It is not an exchange to take more than what you give. It is an exchange that multiplies. It is important for women to not hold back. When they write, the act of writing brings out all they never knew they could be, without any restraints, rules or exclusions leading them on to an untiring, tenacious and never-ending search for love. She concludes with the words “In one another we will never be lacking” which is in fact her pertinent recognition that in an exchange that is no longer controlled by phallogocentric values, women will not lack anything.
