

FOREIGN LANGUAGES STUDIES IN WEST AFRICA: NIGERIA AND BENIN



Edited By
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and **Flavien GBETO**

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Omotayo Foluke SIWOKU-AWI

Definitions of culture are many and divergent. Culture, as opined by Rosamind Billington *et al.* (*Culture and Society*, 1991), may mean the "best" representations of values of art, literature and music, perhaps we should also include, human comportment and behavioural patterns. A scientific concept of culture will imply the growth of organisms in the popular view of cultivation in agricultural activities. Culture has also been defined against ethnological, sociological, anthropological, psychological, gender, political, historical and literary and linguistic concepts. We assume culture to mean an eclectic synthesis of all that make up the ideas and mode of life of mankind everywhere. As the anthropologist Tylor (1891) (cited in Billington et al, op. cit. p.18) expresses it, culture is

that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief,
art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities
and habits acquired by man (...) as a member of society.

Theorists have identified explicit culture as whatever is evident and observable and implicit, which allies with the definition given about behavioural patterns, closely linked to the psychological and biological systems of the individual.

Theoretical conceptions about feminism are structured to advocate a peculiar female culture. If as A. Kluckhorn (cf. Billington et al) stresses, culture is normative and affiliative, it integrates the individual into a group, feminists have since constituted themselves into a cultural configuration, which spans literary, linguistic, gender, education, generational, work, sexuality and class concepts. Female writers extend their thematic concerns to incorporate all aspects of human life to which theoretical concepts are often applied. In essence, feminism has constituted another culture that integrates woman interests and supports sexual identification that enhance the self-concept and a total welfare of the concerned. It is not a distinctive class culture which excludes other cultures as created by intellectual, political educational specialisation nor is it expected to act in friction with the global culture. It is in fact a socio-cultural autonomous class, a subset of a world-wide culture. If feminists struggle for change, it is a change with a global import, a dissemination and an integration of positive values, perhaps sometimes, not for the moralists or religionists. However, our views are in consonance with the fact that there exist many mediating factors between

social and political structures and individual culture. In reality we will assume a symbiotic relationship between society and the individual. Society affects individuals and makes them who they are. This in literary criticism we shall relate to social realism. We view characters in the context of their daily living as their reactions are contingent upon social realities. It is in fact the psychological factors that intervene in human behavioural patterns that have concerned theorists of psychoanalytic criticism or humanistic analysis of culture and society. Billington *et al.* (*op. cit.* p. 17) express the view that

It is the apparent powerlessness of the individual against the economic and technological forces and mass culture produced by capitalism which is the concern of "critical theory" of the Frankfurt School.

Feminism represents a counter culture which is critical of male hegemony, oppression of women, sexual inhibitions, and manipulations, genitalia mutilation, work discrimination, etc. Feminist literature has been a vehicle to raise consciousness of women and men in relation to gender cultures. Ortnor, 1974, (cited by Billington *et al.*, *op. cit.* p. 120) states;

"The secondary status of women in society is one of the true universals, a pan-cultural fact".

It is the attempt to reverse the subordinate status of women that feminist would call counter-culture. Developing a female culture implies a break away from the traditional purview which makes the woman a sex-object, a prostitute, a subordinate to man in decision making and world of work. It implies making a place for the woman in the gendered segregation of the labour market, giving equal remuneration, concession and freedom to choose to continue to remain functional in social reproduction, and as the case may be, make the choice of a bed-mate and not one imposed by patriarchal cultures.

Feminine Discourse: a cult of rhetorics.

Hard-line feminists have complained about the predominant phallocentric culture as being anti-feminist, therefore it is important that a female language be developed. In the first volume of *Women and Literature: Gender and Literary Voice*. Vol. 1 (1980 edited by Jane Todd), the issue addressed is if there is a distinctive female style/tone/content. Feminist writers express dilemma in being able to communicate in a language produced by a social order in which they have had no part in. Many have reasoned, how they could write in a language that has so terribly oppressed women.

Wollstonecraft is reported by Jane Todd to have found patriarchal language intractable. English women writers, sharing Mary Wollstonecraft's views, developed their own style of writing without necessarily copying the

longstanding male style. Fanny Burney, Jane Austen and Virginia Woolf all belonging to different literary periods were vehement in their declarations that they would not be "devoured by wild beasts".

Similarly, by 1945, French women writers had worried over the dilemma of women using a language that they have not created. In her work, "Women in France ", George Eliot took her stand, insisting that the peculiarity of her feminine conditions and lifestyle must give rise to distinctive forms and combinations. Some writers like Marguerite Duras, suggest that before a separate feminine linguistic world can be worked out, there must first be a recognition of the female muteness.

French feminist novelists have attributed a central importance to Lacanian psychoanalysis. Jacques Lacan tries to dissociate the phallus from sexuality and politics, attributing phallocentricism only to a linguistic system. Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous broke away from Lacan's view, finding his transcendental phallus hard to swallow.

In her style, Luce Irigaray refuses the limits of traditional genres and calls into question the concept of philosophical discourse, her primary aim being to deconstruct and disrupt patriarchal subjectivity. According to her the forces of modern technology that threaten our very existence are rooted in patriarchy. Her notion is that female autonomy is developed within the context of an ethical social order, where the opposite sex is considered different from oneself. It is this ethic of sexual difference which forms the basis for inter-subjective and social relations. Eva Martin Sartomi and Dorothy Wynne Zimmerman in their *French Women Writers* (1994 p. 231) do a description of Luce Irigaray's style,

To enumerate just a few characteristics of her style: there is rarely any contextualizing introduction to the subject being treated; the reader is assumed to have substantive knowledge of the classic texts of Western philosophy; the ambiguity, irony, and playfulness of style require active participation on the part of the reader in interpretation; plays on words, metaphors, analogies, neologisms, direct authorial intervention from explicit interjections to implicit commentary (e. g; question and exclamation marks in brackets, ellipses, underlining, quotes around key or problematic words, etc.), ambiguous use of pronouns, the pulling- apart of words with parentheses and hyphens e. g. , "project", "specula(riza)tion", "hom(m)osexuality" to uncover lost meanings or discover hidden ones, and numerous other techniques result in a style requiring not only careful reading but a certain familiarity with

the author's theories and projects.

Monique Wittig, a French also, attempts to construct a new language - a lesbian language, in which the categories of sex are abolished. Like Simone de Beauvoir, Wittig contends that one is not born a woman, people are made what they are by cultural stereotyping. Patriarchal or heterosexual language patterns embody concepts that favour women's subordination to men. Her goal is to reconstruct all cultural symbolic systems, make them into complex symbols in order to reshape her readers' consciousness and then abolish gender itself. Her works offer a good example of *écriture féminine*. She vehemently opposes patriarchal discourse and suggests the possibility of a new language for women. Maggie Humm in *Contemporary Feminist Criticism* (1994, p. 99) writes about her style:

One of her devices is to experiment with pronouns and nouns. In this way, Wittig splits a text's subject. In the *Dictionary* she goes so far as to reject the name 'woman' altogether since it means 'one who belongs to another'.

Eva Martin Sartori and Dorothy Wynne Zimmerman (op. cit. 527) call her device economy of style, of which she writes in

... short passages (many only a paragraph in length), seemingly juxtaposed arbitrarily. The reader must look for ways to connect the passages into a coherent narrative. Often a single word, repeated in several passages, accumulates into a coherent narrative.

Julia Kristeva is a practising psychoanalyst and linguistic critic. Her interest in feminist criticism was greatly influenced by Freud and Lacan. What is striking in her critical work is her theoretical creation. She combined the theories of Marxism and Psychoanalysis together with semiotics as a prolinguistic experience of the child in the pre-oedipal relationship to its mother. The experience is constituted in bodily drives, feelings and aural and vocal rhythms, they are subsequently channelled into the domain of symbolization and language. Semiotic forms are constituted in the subconscious and cannot be shut off from culture. She argues that the semiotic is closely linked to femininity because it is linked to the pre-patriarchal phase of human development, it is therefore distributive to patriarchy and the symbolic Law of the Father.

Kristeva suggests that feminists develop a discourse closer to the body and emotions, that pre-oedipal phase which is repressed by the social contract or the paternal language. She is interested in the ways in which language can call up this early subjectivity of pre-symbolic oral life. She says great writers are those who can immerse their readers in the semiotic. The semiotic according to her can be traced in literary texts through analysis of

segmentation of sentences, syntactical ellipses, dreams, irregular rhythms or the use of sounds resembling children's murmurs. Very few feminists have adopted Julia Kristeva's aesthetic criteria. Nevertheless her postulation should be seen more as a psychic reconstruction, that in pregnancy, a woman can recover a repressed relationship to the maternal semiotic when they go through childbirth.

These abstract conjectures do not in actual fact relate to the practical oppression and gender struggle that women engage in. Reducing the female experience to a semiotic experience which can be recaptured at childbirth underplays the heinous effect of patriarchy. Only women who choose to be mothers are seen as the sole activists in gender struggle, while men or barren women are left out. This is also a separatist view within the feminine discourse and common struggle.

However, her views have influenced many contemporary female activists and language theoreticians like Deborah Cameron. Second wave feminists (1960s and 1970s) have concerned themselves with linguistic and cultural representations of women. They protested strongly against beauty contests since they are particularly aimed at making woman the object of man's pleasure. Feminists challenge the use of offensive terms used to address women like 'Blonde in fatal car crash'; 'bitches wear furs' or androcentric words which present men as the only relevant beings in the world. Feminists advocated the use of 'non sexist language' where androcentric words are non-existent or they should become neutral like 'mankind' becomes 'humanity', chairman is now often used as chairperson.

Language is crucial to feminist practice, care must be taken to avoid sexist representations by female writers, this has therefore led to the postulation of some kind of linguistic theory. This was particularly favoured by the creation of consciousness raising (CR) groups by women. Women came together to articulate their personal experiences, thereby discovering that they share similar problems with other women. In these sessions women felt liberated from being able to put into words the previous inexpressible and vague experiences they have had, especially also that they were required to pay close attention to their verbal expression and to find new ways of talking about things. Sexist words are left out.

This is extended in the literary works in which women relate their experiences, in realist modes of representations, like in story telling, fictionalized or non-fictionalized autobiographical writing or the novel form for the purpose of consciousness raising and in the struggle for socio-political changes. No new language has been formulated to recount the female experience. Feminists like Dale Spender argue that language use affects what a person perceives as real, and it is ironical that the reality of feminism is defined or represented by men's language. It is in this wise that

psychoanalysis contends that language is not neutral, it creates and structures us as social beings. Deborah Cameron in her critical work *Feminism & Linguistic Theory* (1985, 1992, p. 14) discusses the complex ideas advanced by feminist theorists.

For feminists, the interesting implication of this idea is that language may 'speak' men and women (more technically, masculine and feminine subjects) differently. One crucial aspect of a person's gender might be their relation to language. Some feminist theorists have suggested that 'femininity' means in a sense being outside language or marginal to it. This might explain the alienation of many women from prevailing forms of (rational, unified) discourse. It might suggest, too, the necessity for women to create new ways of using language. Others argue that our language, like everything else, has become so fragmented that we cannot talk in these abstract terms ('language', 'women', 'femininity'); we need a less global, less utopian feminist account of language.

There is therefore no consensus about what forms feminist linguistic representations should take. Semiology, defined by Ferdinand de Saussure as "the study of sign systems" seems a convenient approach to the analysis of psychoanalytically-oriented discourse, this is used as a symbolic discourse in relation to other conventional literary patterns.

To date, there are no peculiar feminine literary aesthetics. Female writers use the various literary forms already practised by men or employed by them to oppress and subjugate woman. Nevertheless, it is evident that the various anti-patriarchal representations or tirades have the purpose of effecting immense changes in feminine self-perception and male/female relationship. What is common to all feminists writings is that the textual strategies define themselves against established and apparently flourishing canon of male writing. In essence there is much overlap in thematic concerns.

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