

CRITICAL AWARENESS

AN APPROACH TO LITERARY CRITICISM AND THEORY

Critical Awareness: An Approach to Literary Criticism and Theory is a study guide to revisit the basic tenets of Literary Criticism and Theory. It is a re-studying and analysis of Classical Literary Criticism and Modern Literary Theories by some of our contemporary literary scholars, who have, through their understanding, redefined and simplified the basic elements of Criticism and Theory in Literature.

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ANTHOLOGY AND REFERENCE BOOK OF
RESEARCH ARTICLES ON LITERARY THEORY AND CRITICISM

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Challenging Narratives: Understanding *Écriture Féminine* and its Modern Implications

Ms. Sumedha Dasgupta

ABSTRACT

This chapter takes a look at Helene Cixous' concept of *écriture féminine* and tries to understand the social context in which it was written. It breaks down the essay, "The Laugh of the Medusa" to closely understand the meaning of *écriture féminine*, and what it implies for readers. There is also an attempt to understand Cixous' work in relation to the prevalent philosophical frameworks that inspired her work- deconstruction, poststructuralism and psychoanalysis.

Keywords: feminism, *écriture féminine*, Helene Cixous, Laugh of the Medusa, women's writing

In recent years, the word feminism has made its way into our vocabularies, knowingly or unknowingly. The term has become one of the most misunderstood words, with people often using it as a synonym for misandry. So much so that we have even seen the emergence of the word, 'feminazi', a word used to describe feminist perspectives as extreme, thus discrediting the feminism debate. But none of these meanings capture the true essence of feminism. In this chapter, we will explore the history and background of feminism, and understand the concept of *écriture féminine*, a prominent part of feminist literary theory. But before we approach the theory, it is important to understand the sociocultural context of the feminist movement, as well as why the concept of *écriture féminine* came to be.

The word originates from Old French 'feminin', which comes from the Latin word 'femina', meaning "woman," and -isme comes from the Latin suffix -ismus, which makes a noun into a practice, system or doctrine. Oxford English Dictionary defines feminism as the "advocacy of equality of the sexes and the establishment of the political, social, and economic rights of the female sex; the movement associated with this". Notice how the first half of the definition makes it pretty clear that the movement seeks to advocate for the equality of sexes, and does not, in any way, intend to favor the female sex over the other.

The issue of equality of sexes was first raised during the French Revolution, when a group of working women marched to Versailles and demanded two things: first, food to feed their family, and second, political change. While the French Revolution did not result in the

emancipation of women immediately, it definitely did create a context for other individuals to challenge the patriarchal status quo and raise their voices against the issue. After the French revolution, France's National Constituent Assembly wrote the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen in 1789, which was a document highlighting the civil and human rights of the people. This document helped conceptualize the ideas of democracy and liberty across the whole world. In reaction to this, French activist and playwright Olympe de Gouges wrote the Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the Female Citizen in 1791, which highlighted the absence of women from the original document and established that the French Revolution did not address the issue of gender inequality. While de Gouges was executed after being convicted for treason after the publication of the document, the Declaration paved the way for future feminist movements to demand for equal rights.

Meanwhile, women also began to rally in North America, demanding to put an end to slavery as well as women's subjugation. They conducted the 'First Women's Rights Convention' in 1848, also known as the Seneca Falls Convention, which was a two-day event held in the Wesleyan Chapel at Seneca Falls, New York, and intended to "discuss the social, civil, and religious condition and rights of woman", as advertised by the organizers. The event culminated with the signing of the Declaration of Sentiments, which was a document that presented the complaints of women in America, written in a rhetoric similar to the United States Declaration of Independence, which highlighted that both men and women had "inalienable rights". The Declaration demanded that women be given the right to vote, and ultimately culminated in the suffrage movement, which came to be known as the first wave of feminism. The subsequent waves dealt with the issues that needed to be tackled: the second wave dealt with social and legal equality, the third wave focused on individualism, and established the need for 'feminisms' instead of feminism, to deal with the intersectionality and mixed identities and experiences of women across the world, and the fourth wave of feminism encouraged people to raise their voices against sexual harassment and violence against women.

This brief history of feminism helps us to understand the background and development of the movement. This was the sociocultural context in which texts like John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* (1869) and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) was written. Both of these texts are seminal texts of feminist discourse, and raise the issue of suppression of women. Reading these texts in the 21st century, it might seem to most people that these works are simply stating obvious facts. But at the time these texts were written, they challenged the prevailing narrative that women were, by default, inferior. This narrative was (and still is, to some extent) so deep-rooted, that it didn't need to be expressed explicitly into words; it was engrained into the subconscious of the people. These beliefs were inculcated in such a manner, that it was difficult to identify that these thoughts were shaped by the society and were not actually 'obvious' facts.

It becomes important to understand the importance of narratives in shaping society and culture. There exists a cyclical relation between the two: while culture shapes our narratives, narratives also shape culture. This can be understood more easily by the following example: