

Julia Kristeva's "semiotic chora" and its Subversive Potential

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Abstract: Julia Kristeva considers "Poetry" to be "the privileged site of analysis". This statement of Kristeva is one that is loaded with meaning as she draws upon the relationship between gender and language. Adhering to the Poststructural theory, she begins with the premise that gender difference dwells in language which is our tool for applying meaning to the world. Kristeva is indebted to the poststructural psychoanalyst Lacan for her theory of poetry because she believes that the site at which psychological subjugation takes place and can be investigated is "language". Kristeva differs from Lacan in that she reveals a "semiotic dimension" of language which exhibits a new poetic maternal linguistic practice". This paper attempts to analyze the concept of the "semiotic" dimension of language as proposed by Julia Kristeva, and how this new poetic maternal linguistic practice gives women a voice in the phallogentric language of the "symbolic" order.

Keywords: gender, language, psychoanalysis, semiotic, symbolic, phallogentric.

The paradoxical task of voicing the silence that has enveloped women and their predicament for centuries is only possible if women write from their own perspective. "Serious literature", says Shashi Deshpande in her essay "Writing from the Margin", "is supposed to be written by men about men; when women write, it is never regarded as just 'writing', it is always 'women's writing'". So when a woman writes, she cannot be just a writer, she is always a woman writer. Deshpande raises the very pertinent question in this essay, "Why is women's writing, specially when it deals with women's lives, considered to be both insignificant and marginal? What confers the badge of inferiority on women's writing? Why do we have so many men disclaiming any interest in a woman's work? Are women's lives and their works of interest only to other women? The answer she says lies in the history of women. We live in a patriarchal society, a patriarchal culture, which is in every way a man's world. The laws, customs, practices and beliefs are therefore all designed to suit male needs. So when women write from a female perspective it is considered "minor", "inferior", and "trivial". "Marginalization begins here, for with this label one is steadily edged away from the group of writers in general" (Deshpande 145). Very rarely have women been encouraged to express themselves because in many respects women's lives, and experiences have been assumed to be normative. Even if women's writing was acknowledged it was done if it was in line with men's perspective. Activities which occur in public are coined "important," while private life and feelings are less important. Even if women's writing was acknowledged it was done if it was in line with men's perspective. And as

we are all aware of the fact that the evolution of language as well as the process of the formation of the canons of literature has always been a male prerogative, the female experience in spite of being that of half of the human race, is undervalued due to patriarchal assumptions about the superior worth of male experience. This does not at all mean that women have no perspective of their own, or no creative experience to share with the world.

"The question of gender is a question of language," says Barbara Johnson (37). The relationship between gender and language characterizes the approach of the group of feminists who draw upon the theories of poststructuralism. They begin from the premise that gender difference dwells in language which is our tool for applying meaning to the world. Language plays a role in creating subjectivity and maintaining gender asymmetries. The French Feminists like Helene Cixous and Julia Kristeva have drawn at length in stating their theories from Lacan's distinction between the pre-Oedipal, maternal pre-linguistic, "imaginary order" and the "phallogocentric" stage of symbolic language. For the French psychoanalytic feminists, women's psychological liberation must take place. The site at which most of the psychological subjugation takes place and can be investigated is "language." Julia Kristeva finds in psychoanalysis the concept of the bodily drives that survive cultural pressure by seeking access to what she calls "semiotic discourse." She is indebted to Lacan for the notion of the basic opposition between the "semiotic" and the "symbolic" which correspond to Lacan's distinction between the two realms, the "imaginary" and the "symbolic." Kristeva's "semiotic" is closely related to the infantile pre-linguistic, pre-Oedipal stage referred to in the Lacanian theory as the "Imaginary" realm. She has gained fame for the distinction between what she calls the "semiotic" and the "symbolic." All signification, she maintains, is composed of these two elements. Semiotic discourse is the gestural, rhythmic language tied to the instincts and is based on the bodily drives that survive cultural pressures. This is how Kristeva explains the "semiotic":

What I call 'the semiotic' takes us back to the pre-linguistic states of childhood where the child babbles the sounds s/he hears, or where s/he articulates rhythms, alliterations, or stresses, trying to imitate his/her surroundings. In this state the child doesn't yet possess the necessary linguistic signs and thus there is no meaning in the strict sense of the term. It is only after the mirror phase or the experience of castration in the Oedipus complex that the individual becomes subjectively capable of taking on the signs of language, of articulation as it has been prescribed – and I call that 'the symbolic'. (Kristeva, Interview 19)

In this sense, the "semiotic" opposes the "symbolic" which is based on the rules and regularities of conventional language and correlates words with meaning in a stricter, mathematical sense. For Lacan, the child's acquisition of language initiates it into the symbolic order. The Symbolic Order is the world known through language, and since it is phallogocentric

it socially programs us according to the rules and prohibitions of the society. Kristeva differs from Lacan in the sense that she attempts to reveal the "semiotic" dimension of language that Lacan excludes. She argues that the "semiotic" has a subversive potential and describes it as a poetic maternal linguistic practice that disrupts the "symbolic," which is understood as culturally intelligible rule governed speech. Kristeva for the most part follows Lacan's model of psychosexual development, however she tries to recast it by offering a more central place for the maternal and feminine in the subject's psychosexual development. Kristeva has therefore influenced feminine psychoanalysis by providing an alternative to the phallogentric model of the subject. Kristeva says that since women have a marginal position in a masculine culture they speak and write in "hysterics," a semiotic style which is repetitive, and has spasmodic separations from the dominating discourse. In Kristeva's account, the "symbolic" arises through the repression of the "semiotic." She claims that the maternal aspects of language are repressed in symbolic speech. It is by seeking the "semiotic" dimension of language that one can get beyond patriarchal thinking. It is through it that we remain, though unconsciously, in continual contact with our instinctual drives, our preverbal experience and our earliest connections to our mothers. "In Kristeva's account, the 'symbolic' arises through the repression of the 'semiotic'" (Feral 2-14). Poetic language marks "the return of the repressed elements of the semiotic within the realm of the symbolic, notably by way of rhythm, mimesis, intertextuality, and linguistic play" (Cook 437). Distinguishing between scientific discourse and poetic language, Kristeva says, "Scientific discourse, for example tends to reduce as much as possible the semiotic component. On the contrary, in poetic language, the semiotic tends to gain the upper hand" (Kristeva, *Desire* 134). That is why Kristeva considers poetry to be the "privileged site" of analysis.

Kristeva maintains that it is through the semiotic dimension of language that women and men can both get beyond patriarchal thinking and patriarchal language. She explains it as an unsystematized signifying process centered on the mother. Just before the child acquires language, it expresses itself through the "archaic semiotic modality" like "da-da." Feminine psychology as a genre recognizes the centrality of the mother daughter relationship because as the child enters the Symbolic Order, it enters the symbolic realm of language which is in Lacan's theory the realm of the father. In the Symbolic Order, the phallus, which is used in a symbolic sense to stand for male privilege and authority, is the privileged signifier. The phallus is the masculine metaphor in a phallogentric language; women do not find their voice in the Symbolic Order. "[Women] experience language as something that is secondary, cold, foreign in their lives" (Kristeva, *Question* 134). Referring to the stage of the "chora" when the infant does not distinguish itself from its mother, Kristeva says that the child exploits "archaic semiotic modality" to express itself. It is only through the semiotic which associates with the

rhythms, tones, movements connected with the maternal body that women writers can share their experiences as women. Once the child enters the symbolic order, it enters the phallogocentric structure of language. Cixous writes that “as soon as they [female children] begin to speak, they can be taught that their territory is black.” They are taught that their “continent is dark” and “dark is dangerous.” And so “they [female children] have internalized this horror of the dark” (Cixous, *Laugh* 877-878). However, the “semiotic” is only repressed it is not lost in the process of acquiring language in the post-mirror stage. The “symbolic” never succeeds in replacing the “semiotic” thoroughly. The pre-mirror phase “babbling” is repressed deep in the psyche, and comes out in the form of poetic language in the case of women who do not find their voice in the phallogocentric language of the Symbolic Order. The semiotic “chora” finds its way out of its situation of repression, and hence causes disruption within discourse. In the semiotic “chora” lie the repressed maternal origins which keep on disrupting the Symbolic Order. The semiotic “chora” is therefore subversive and can be employed strategically to disturb the “symbolic.” The desire for the “chora,” results in poetic discourse and it gives rise to a language different from the dominant language as it unites the non verbal utterances of the semiotic world with the symbolic. According to Kristeva, meaning can be produced only when the “semiotic” meets the “symbolic.” She writes in “*Revolution in Poetic Language*”: “Because the subject is always both semiotic and symbolic, no signifying system he produces can be either exclusively semiotic or exclusively symbolic, and is instead necessarily marked by an indebtedness to both” (Kristeva, *Revolution* 93). So when the logical, phallogocentric symbolic order of language is disrupted by linguistic distortions poetry is produced. By offering a more central place for the maternal and feminine in the subject's psychosexual development, Kristeva has made a very bold attempt to move women's writing from the marginal position in a masculine culture to the centre.

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