



**The Idea of Writing through the Body in the Reading of Helene
Cixous' *The Laugh of the Medusa***

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Abstract

Aim: *The Laugh of the Medusa* by Helene Cixous, is a confrontational attack on male supremacy, advocating a complete overthrow of the biased (male) canon of literature, which opened lively debate on how women should write with a concern for exclusion, the transformation of subjectivity, and the struggle for identity. No doubt, this text has been a popular subject of study by researchers but still today, it has not lost its charm. One of the very insurgent concepts it comes up with is the 'écriture féminine' delineating the idea of writing through the body. Thus, this paper is a humble attempt to project this method of writing by women by taking into consideration its implications and practicability.

Methodology and Approach: *The study is based on the essay 'The Laugh of the Medusa' by Helene Cixous as a primary text. It has employed the feminist approach to dissect the text.*

Outcome: *The essay emphasizes the status of women writings in a patriarchal literary realm with a priority on the body's role and its repercussions.*

Conclusions and Suggestions: *The paper concludes with the idea that the writings of women, especially with the 'body' motif can be effective in empowering the female voice but the clash or conflict of feministic texts with male counterparts should be put to a balance for fruitful literary and social development.*

Keywords: Discourse, Femininity, Phallogentrism, Body.

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From time immemorial, with the beginning of civilization, society became a gender-based structure. But this structure came into existence with male supremacy which got converted into a dominance socially, which today, we define as "patriarchy". Gradually, the impact of this voice of repression started being heard in the realm of literature also. This repression is not just the denying of space to women to write but more importantly, it was the laying down of some sort of conventions on the women that fulfilled the male-centric, that is, phallogentric ideology, particularly in writing. A myth entered the minds of women that they could not write and it was the result of the theories like those put forward and exaggerated by Freud and Lacan, the famous psychoanalysts. Their theory, which can be phrased as 'man has and woman lacks' (that is, phallus) puts a question on the feminine intellect and instinct by describing them as inferior.

This myth of female inferiority, especially in the field of writing seems to undermine feminine creativity and if not, to some extent has deprived women of fully spreading their hands on writing. To dismantle this myth, Helene Cixous, a French feminist, came up with her manifesto *The Laugh of the Medusa* (1976). However, this essay does not stand alone since its sentiments appear frequently in other texts of Helene Cixous.

In the essay, Cixous claimed that women should have a greater consciousness of their bodies while writing, a thing that would create a more honest and appropriate style of openness, fragmentation, and nonlinearity. She tried to analyze the Lacanian and Freudian theory to deconstruct patriarchal hegemony in connected real, symbolic, and imaginary orders and so, Cixous marks:

When the "repressed" of their culture and their society returns, it's an explosive, utterly destructive, staggering return, with a force never yet unleashed and equal to the most forbidding of suppressions. For when the Phallic period comes to an end, women will have been either annihilated or borne up to the highest and most violent incandescence. ("Laugh" 886)

Hence, Cixous' manifestos are more than unorthodox prose, a reaction against and within a symbolic order complicit in dominance. Cixous came up with the new phrase 'écriture féminine' meaning women's writing. But the essay gets its uniqueness with the way Cixous urges the women to write, that is, the way of writing through the body. Writing through or by the body as a biological drive intimately relies on her ceasing back and mastering her own body that has been violently misused by males' rhetoric. It's only from bodily experience that women, according to Cixous can give birth to écriture féminine which will subvert the phallogocentric discourse on masculine writing. Male-centric society has been

producing discourses that happen to glorify male body, their observations, their thinking, and actions concerning the opposite sex. So, Cixous suggests women write by transcending the phallogocentric realm and this is possible only if women begin to know, understand, and become conscious of their bodies, and so, Cixous asserts, "and why don't you write? Write! Writing is for you, you are for you; your body is yours, take it." ("Laugh" 876)

But Cixous is aware of the difficulties of dispositioning and envisioning a writing practice that cannot be theorized and whose existence is scanty. She sets out, not to say what it is, but to point out its implications. In light of this idea, it can be said that by writing through bodily experiences women could attain a source of desire that can be molded into an urge for creativity, as Cixous at the very beginning writes in the future tense, "I shall speak about women's writing: about *what it will do*." ("Laugh" 875)

However, this new way of writing seems to have both literal and symbolic significance. It is the noting down of feelings, desires, emotions, and bodily actions a woman undergoes by herself or any woman irrespective of the male-centric codes and conduct. On the metaphorical level, women writers should have a universality in their writings, that is, having similar feminine polarity just like their own universal biological body.

Cixous criticizes psychoanalysis for its "thesis of a 'natural' anatomical determination of sexual difference-opposition," focusing on physical drives rather than body parts for her single definition of male-female contrasts and she asserts sexuality is superior to phallic-mindedness because masculine is inscribed within boundaries and female libido is cosmic, just as her unconscious, is worldwide. Cixous writes:

Her writing can only keep going, without ever inscribing or discerning contours... She lets the other language speak the

language of 1,000 tongues which knows neither enclosure nor death... Her language does not contain, it carries; it does not hold back, it makes possible." ("Laugh" 889)

These above lines seem to suggest that the writing of women is like torrents of words and statements without any limit; her writing is unilingual, speaking only of woman; her writing can't be contained or assigned as it is hers and only hers; and therefore, women should write for women and man for man.

Cixous go further: if women are to discover and express who they are, to bring to the surface what masculine history has repressed in them; they must begin with their sexuality. Thus, Cixous marks, "a woman without a body, dumb, blind, can't possibly be a good fighter." ("Laugh" 880)

And their sexuality begins with their bodies, with their genital and libidinal difference from men. For various reasons, this is a powerful argument. In the French context, it offers an island of hope in the void left by the deconstruction of humanism, which has been revealed as an ideologically suspect invention by men. If men are responsible for the reigning binary system of meaning-identity/other, dark/light, reason/chaos, man/woman, then women, relegated to the negative and passive pole of this hierarchy, are not implicated in the creation of its myths. Certainly, women are no longer impressed by them. And the immediacy with which the body, the id, and *jouissance*, are supposedly experienced promises a clarity of perception and vitality that can bring down mountains of phallogocentric delusion. Finally, to the extent that the female body is seen as a direct source of female writing, a powerful alternative discourse seems possible: to write from the body is to re-create the world. Hence, Cixous writes, "She must write herself because this is the invention of a new insurgent writing.....liberation has come..." ("Laugh" 880)

But writing through the body is a problematic as well as powerful concept. For if one posits that female subjectivity is derived from women's physiology and bodily instincts as they affect the sexual experience and the unconscious, both theoretical and practical problems can and do arise. They have been criticized as idealist and essentialist, bound up in the very system they claim to undermine; they have been attacked as theoretically utopian and as fatal to constructive political action and it seems these objections are worth making. Theoretical work and practical evidence strongly suggest that sexual identity ("I am a woman, I experience my body as sexual in this way") never takes shape in isolation or a simple physical context. The child becomes male or female in response to the females and males she encounters in her family and to the male and female images she constructs according to her experience especially her loss of direct access to either parent. The desires of the child and of the adult who grows out of the child finally result not from the isolated erotic sensitivities of the child's body; these sensitivities are interpreted through the meanings the child attaches to her body through early experience in a sexed world.

Therefore, first off, the basic theoretical question: Can the body be a source of self-knowledge? Does female sexuality exist before or despite social experience? If we get answers to these questions, it happens that these changes might reverse the values assigned to each side of the polarity, but it might still leave a man as the determining referent, not departing from the male-female opposition, but participating in it. This is, we think, a convincing position, on both philosophical and pragmatic levels why what we need to do is to move outside that male-centered, binary logic altogether. We need to ask not how 'Woman' is different from Man' (though the question of how women differ from what men *think* they are is important). We need to know how women have come to be who they are through history, which is the history of their oppression by men and

male-designed institutions. Only through an analysis of the power relationships between men and women, and practices based on that analysis, will we put an end to our oppression, and only then will we discover what women are or can be. More strategically, we need to know whether the assertion of a shared female nature made by feminine can help us in feminist action toward a variety of goals: the possibility of working, or working in marginal or newly defined ways, or of not working in the public world at all; the freedom for a diversity of sexual practices; the right to motherhood, childlessness, or some as yet untheorized participation in reproduction; the affirmation of historically conditioned female values (nurturance, communal rather than individualistic ambitions, insistence on improving the quality of private life), and the exploration of new ones. If we concentrate our energies on opposing a counterview of 'Woman' to the view held by men in the past and the present, then what happens to our ability to support the multiplicity of women and the various life possibilities they are fighting for in the future?

So, in *Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of l'Ecriture feminine*, Ann Rosalind Jones writes that after this long quest, women are swimming in a terrible soup of values-for, to be safe, they had to refuse the so-called female values, which are not female but a social scheme, and to identify with male values, which are not male but an appropriation by men or attribution to men-of all human values, mixed up with the anti-values of domination, violence, oppression and the like. In this mixture, where is their real identity?

To answer this Cixous made a satisfactory attempt but there is a lack of theoretical depth and polemical energy in her ideas which makes them partially vital strategies. So, simply speaking, women's writing will be more accessible to writers and readers alike if we recognize it as a conscious response to socio-literary realities, rather than accept it as an overflow of one woman's unmediated

communication with her body. Whatever the difficulties, women are still inventing new kinds of writing. So, we need to recognize, too, that there is nothing universal about the French version of *écriture féminine*. Writings of women need to be looked at and understood in their social context if we are to fill in an adequate and genuinely empowering picture of women's creativity. We need not, however, replace phallogentrism with a concentric but blur theory of feminine discourse that recognizes a refusal of masculinist values at the cost of historical specificities of women.

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