

RADICAL FEMALE AUTHORSHIP: TOWARDS A PSYCHO-FEMINIST LITERARY CRITICISM

*Norman David Marín Calderón**

ABSTRACT

In this article, and from the reflections of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, I will start the study of traditional concepts of authorship, women's writing, and the textual/sexual meaning of authorship. Likewise, I will analyze the conceptualization of desire in the formation of gender identity, subject formation, and female representation according to the theory of psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan and the rereading of his theories by feminist psychoanalysis. Next, the issue of epistolary writing will be examined as a confessional and subversive kind of female writing, mainly from the perspective of Linda Kauffman. Finally, I will examine the subversive elements of sisterhood and female sexuality according to the radical ideas of bell hooks and Adrienne Rich.

Key words: Authorship, gender identity, epistolary writing, sorority, female sexuality.

RESUMEN

En este artículo, y desde las reflexiones que hacen Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, empezaré el estudio de los conceptos tradicionales de autoría, escritura femenina y el significado textual/sexual de dicha autoría. Igualmente, analizaré la conceptualización de deseo en la formación de la identidad sexual, la constitución subjetiva y la representación femenina de acuerdo a la teoría del psicoanalista Jacques Lacan y las relecturas que hace de este el psicoanálisis feminista. Luego, será examinado el problema de la escritura epistolar como una forma confesional, pero subversiva de escritura femenina, principalmente desde la perspectiva teórica de Linda Kauffman. Finalmente, examinaré los elementos subversivos sobre sororidad y sexualidad femenina de acuerdo a las ideas radicales de bell hooks y Adrienne Rich.

Palabras clave: Autoría, identidad de género, escritura epistolar, hermandad entre mujeres, sexualidad femenina.

In this article, we will explore the various possibilities women, along history, have had to (re)define their lives in accord with healthy self-love, self-affirmation, and determination. In this research project, the lives of women will be explored from different theoretical perspectives of analysis in order to delve into their rich inner universe: a voyage into the domain of their desire and their revolutionary

quest against male-dominated models. In that sense, in patriarchal cultures, women have often occupied the place of "object," usually (trans) formed by a male "other." This "object" position confines women to a marginalized place of silence and lack of communication predetermined by a powerful man who dictates the rules, and the punishment in case of transgression. *In Speculum of the Other Woman* (1985), Lucia Irigaray

* Profesor de Estudios Latinoamericanos, Ball State University. Doctor en Literatura Hispanoamericana, Purdue University, Estados Unidos. Magíster en Literatura Inglesa por la Universidad de Costa Rica. Maestro en Teoría Psicoanalítica por el Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Psicoanalíticos de México.

poignantly asks “and what if the object started to talk?” (135): it would become the subject because speech is only articulated from the position of the subject, according to patriarchal syntax which arranges the Western world to its own purpose and convenience. In this syntax, the verb and the speaking subject are always male. Men are the ones who usually do all the talking, writing, and wishing. Movement and the active strength of the verb have been exclusive to the male domain, and women have been relegated to paralysis and to the silence of the object.

Therefore, feminist writing attempts to deconstruct this hierarchy and to transfer women to the position of a subject that also starts the action of the verb. The female act of re-appropriating voice for the woman/object represents a subversion of male syntax. On entering the discourses that dominate, define, and describe the world, the speaking subject appropriates the creative power of meaning, that is, an action of full significance. From the signifying processes that define reality, there springs the possibility of manipulating the world as well as (re)creating it. Traditionally, creative power has been the absolute property of the patriarchal domain. Nevertheless, as this article intends to show, feminist literature subverts not only the traditional images of male literary creation, but also the creative process itself.

1. The Page and the Pen

The metaphor of the page and the pen represents female writing and authorship. The phrase “page and pen” is taken from the feminist ideas of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar that are, in turn, the point of departure for this analysis. Gilbert and Gubar are feminist writers who explore the genesis, production, and representation of female writings within a patriarchal context. Their work examines the difficult paths by which female writers appropriate their own words, repudiate a (hetero)sexist environment, and undermine patriarchal inscriptions. In doing so, Gilbert and Gubar attest to the recovery of women’s transformational power through writing

itself. In their masterpiece *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Gilbert and Gubar analyze strategic appropriation of women’s subjectivity by means of their writing. These key points of female representation are the core of this section about female authorship and epistolary writing.

The term “Feminine Writing”¹ has (at least) two meanings: the “textualization of women” and their authorship. By means of “textualization,” a woman is considered a prewritten entity, a product defined by the authorization of the male “Other.” The woman herself, that is, the historical flesh-and-bone subject versus the discourses that define her, is represented dichotomously. So far, women have worn masks molded by the male other. Women are, therefore, reduced to “copy-selves,” as pointed out by Gilbert and Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic*. They define “copy-selves” as predetermined images (angel and monster) imposed upon women in order to bury any individuality. These images constitute a series of “maxims”² which women have internalized as unquestionable truths. In “Emphasis Added: Plots and Pausibilities in Women’s Fiction,” Nancy K. Miller affirms that

the fictions of desire behind the desiderata of fiction are masculine and not universal constructs. [. . .] the maxims that pass for the truth of human experience, and the encoding of that experience in literature, are organizations, when they are not fantasies, of the dominant culture. (357)

This artificial representation of women becomes a type of prewritten dramatic play in which the woman-object plays a role established by the dominant order that, at the same time, is the author of her fate. This order is phallogocentric³ in that everything is dominated by the male rule; everything is measured by the masculine ruler. Traditionally, a woman’s life has been ruled by the power of the phallus that imposes its significance on her.

Likewise, Western culture foments a series of binary pairs in relation to the masculine and the feminine which parallels the binary opposition of subject-object. Within these images, man has embodied the upper value, the

highest position in the interrelationship between the sexes. He represents the creating, producing, writing, speaking, and desiring subject, that is, the active, originating impulse involved in these human activities. On the contrary, the image of the woman implies passivity, and constitutes the created, produced, written, spoken (for), and desired object. She is just the product of the creative powers of man. Therefore, there is an implicit sexuality in literary creation which is stated in the prominent question of Gilbert and Gubar: "Is a pen a metaphorical penis?" (3). In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, the response to this question is affirmative, demonstrating the traditional notion that artistic creation is directly derived from a "male gift." In this respect, Gerard Manley Hopkins affirms that "the artist's most essential quality [. . .] is masterly execution, which is a kind of male gift, and especially marks off men from women, the begetting of one's thought on paper, on verse, or whatever the matter is" (qtd. in Gilbert and Gubar: 3). Therefore, the textual act becomes a sexual act. In the sexual fiction created and written by male authors, man is transformed metaphorically into the virile, erect pen ejaculating his creative ink on the fragile blank page, on which he imposes his own rules. For Gilbert and Gubar, the virgin page, as a metaphorization of the traditional submissive woman, awaits passively, in silence, whereas the pen moves rhythmically on the virginal page, filling her with the seeds of male significance:

[A] literary text is not only speech quite literally embodied, but also power mysteriously made manifest, made flesh. In patriarchal Western culture, therefore, the text's author is a father, a progenitor, a procreator, an aesthetic patriarch whose pen is an instrument of generative power like his penis. More, his pen's power, like his penis's power, is not just the ability to generate life but the power to create a posterity to which he lays claim. (Gilbert and Gubar 6)

It is at this point that the mother-page becomes the uterus-receptacle which contains the textual body generated by the father-pen.

Male authors and all patriarchal textual bodies affirm a definition of *woman* as a plain,

blank slate, or *tabula rasa*, in which the dominant ideology inscribes traits such as docility, passivity, and other characteristics featured as innate feminine attributes. She, therefore, becomes the receptacle of male signification. Her position as a void element in relation to the male "whole" turns her into an invisible being because the feminine represents emptiness against the full-fledged masculine. Gilbert and Gubar assert:

The roots of "authority" tell us, after all, that if woman is man's property then he must have authored her, just as surely as they tell us that if he authored her she must be his property. As a creation "penned" by man, moreover, woman has been "penned up" or "penned in." [. . .] As a thought he has "framed," she has been both "framed" (enclosed) in his texts, glyphs, graphics, and "framed up" (found guilty, found wanting) in his cosmologies. (13)

According to Gilbert and Gubar, women constitute an empty space in the public world of universal "truths" because they are confined to the private domestic space. These "truths" are born from a male center and a phallogocentric language; therefore, each and every deriving aspect of these truths is necessarily male. The abrogation of the feminine sphere by the male universal makes language a powerful device of patriarchy to dominate and oppress women.

Monique Wittig, in her essay "The Mark of Gender," refers to this situation, showing that the feminine linguistic sign never reaches the universal status ascribed to the masculine one. However, Wittig's concern is the deconstruction of these linguistic maxims. For her, women are capable of producing texts in a context of total rupture with phallogocentric culture; linguistic signs exclusively produced by women, regardless of male approval. The notion of gender in language is "a mark unique of its kind, the unique lexical symbol that refers to an oppressed group. No other has left its traces within language to such a degree that to eradicate it would not only modify language at the lexical level but would upset the structure itself and its functioning" (Wittig 72). This erasing process of the whole female linguistic capability ineluctably leads women to the prohibition to be an active element

of language. Nevertheless, Wittig's struggle starts with language to transcend gender. She succeeds in "universalizing" the feminine by cancelling patriarchal gender inscriptions and making them obsolete. Her main goal is definitely to "womanize" language by recasting syntax and rewriting the "impossible" linguistic gender inscriptions as possible.

Gilbert's, Gubar's and Wittig's criticism serve to place the reader at the genesis of canonical authorship as a creation and production of an almighty male artist, and to reappraise the struggle of women to gain political, literary, and critical representation. These critical perspectives broaden the horizon of women writers in order to give them the opportunity to represent their womanhood in literature and produce texts for and about women.

2. The Wishing Page: The Poetics of Desire⁴

The restriction of women's linguistic potential also hides the prohibition to enter the realm of desire. According to Lacan, desire is inherent to all human beings. The baby needs food, care, and attention. By the same token, his mother demands certain responses from him; in learning how to satisfy his mother's demands, the child comes to satisfy her desire. Desire is therefore a matter of significant interrelationship; desire is always the desire of the other. In this process, desire can be recognized but never satisfied by an actual object. The woman, like the page, is seen as empty, lacking desire, according to male rules. She can be the desired object, but never the desiring subject. In order to "(re)construct" desire, a woman has to inscribe herself in the Lacanian context of the imaginary, discovering the relationship between the "ego" and the images that construct the subject.

In *Using Lacan, Reading Fiction*, James Mellard explores the main Lacanian theories and techniques. Lacan structures human experience according to a tripartite model of development: the "Imaginary Order or Register," "Symbolic

Order or Register," and "Real Order or Register." On one hand, the Imaginary Order refers to the preverbal infantile realm of interconnectedness between "pleasurable and joyful" child sensations and the sensations of the mother's body. This order is the primary locus of images and rhythms perceiving the world, that is, the child's nonverbal fluid communication. On the other hand, the Symbolic Order deals with the use of symbolic systems such as language, as representation in approaching human life. Entry into the Symbolic order constitutes the assumption of a subjective identity through the representation of language. The construction of this subjective identity is inextricably associated with the acknowledgment of difference as an important feature in the construction of a gender identity. The entrance into Lacanian Symbolic Register assumes the Law of the Father: boys identify with the father's law, but girls cannot "directly" assume the power of the father. Therefore, gender identity is constructed on the basis of the economy of difference, loss, and lack, which according to Mellard's reading of Lacan, means that identity itself is irrevocably fragmented as well: the subject is split whereas the object is lost. A boy's entrance into the Symbolic Order signals acceptance of the Law of the Father and, at the same time, renunciation of (sexual) desire for his mother. Contrarily, a girl entering the Symbolic Order signals the acceptance and assumption of male superiority, power, and authority. Finally, as stated by Mellard, the Real Order is assumed as a powerful experience of fundamental affections such as death, loss, and sexuality. The Real Order is the most inaccessible system to approach since it has to do with profound, unconscious experiences unable to be described as such by the use of either images (imaginary) or language (symbolic). These experiences can only be reached by brief moments of ecstasy or terror described by Lacan as *jouissance*.

Before the infant enters into the realm of language and representation, s/he experiences what Lacan calls the "mirror stage." In this stage, the child acquires a sense of his/her own existence as a separate entity, different from the others, by differentiating his/her own image from

those objects outside. The child assumes his/her sense of selfhood by a process of differentiation, that is, s/he is what s/he is not. Since the Symbolic Order is full of loss and divisions, the subject is always in the flow of a dynamic of impossible longings. The subject is cast within a metonymic movement from one object of desire to another which is perpetual because, according to Lacan, the real object of desire was lost and left in the pre-linguistic rhythmically Imaginary Order. Mellard says that desire is then assumed by a sense of fragmentation of the self and by “a longing for returning to the wholeness of the pre-Oedipal Imaginary Register” (40). Therefore, the main goal of the desiring subject is to reenter the Imaginary Order and, when possible, enter into the Real Order. Hence, desire resides on the plane of the (m)other whereas the law resides on the plane of the “other” parent-the father. Law resides in the Father who is that Other in the Symbolic Order who starts the representation of language while the (m)other is assigned as the lower case other in the plane of the Imaginary. In *Psychoanalytic Criticism*, Elizabeth Wright states that desire is the “flow (of libido) before representation and production” (163). Language itself shows this movement of desire into representation. A word (language) designates something that is absent, and its inscription (whether verbal or written) becomes the most reliable way to give full presence to the desired object. Lacan understands *desire* in terms of language structures:

There is first of all a deviation of man's needs due to the fact that he speaks, in that in so far as his needs are subjugated to the demand they come back to him alienated. This is not the effect of his real dependency but of the putting into signifying/significant form as such and of the fact that it is from the locus of the Other that his message is emitted. That which thus finds itself alienated in needs constitutes an *Urverdrängung* [primal repression], by being unable, by hypothesis, to articulate itself in the demand, but which appears in an offshoot, is what presents itself in man as desire. (*Écrits* 285-6)

In short, a human being realizes about his/her desire because s/he has access to language.

S/He can respond to the demand of the Other and to his/her own desire precisely because of his/her entrance to the realms of words.

In this process of self-recovery, women have to recuperate by means of their own words, not only the desired object forbidden by male impositions, but also desire itself. Women must deal with a male culture that has repressed their entrance to the enterprise of desire. In their theories about desire and feminine writing, Linda Kauffman and Janet Altman explore desire as a means to produce powerful texts capable of transforming women's lives and subverting patriarchal hegemony. In their works, Kauffman and Altman examine contractions of desire within female texts, especially epistolary writing and other confessional types of texts. A woman who writes is a subject who creates and accepts her own desires. Linda Kauffman asserts that:

[c]easelessly repeated in the aftermath of abandonment, a woman's text is a powerful reenactment of pleasure and desire, related less to the mimetic than to the diegetic qualities of narrative, for the narrating heroine is intensely, constantly present as analyst, catalyst, and the creator of her own desire. (25)

According to Kauffman, literature written by women generally describes texts in which desire--a desired object and a desiring subject--is represented. A feminine text especially depicts, in one way or another, (metaphorical) inscriptions that represent the “I-Desire” of female characters. Peter Brooks affirms that desire is the dynamic “movement that is essential to narrative understanding. [. . .] Desire is the motive force of narrative, a self-contained motor that propels the plot. [. . .] desire in narrative, the force that sets a story in motion, is a longing for the end, for the conclusion of both narrative and desire, [. . .]” (qtd. in Clayton: 67-8). In a feminist work, desire becomes the instrument by which women writers penetrate and dissolve the “copy-selves” that have defined them so far. This search for desire becomes an instrumental methodology by which women reach the possibility of approaching the “Other” as well as themselves. Recovering one's own desire implies the (re)appropriation

of oneself. Traditionally, a woman, immersed in an oppressive patriarchal society, becomes a text impregnated by signs of absence, silence, and lack of communication. Then, by an act of self-discovery and self-recovery, this woman enters and accepts the enterprise of desire as an adventure that allows her to (re)appropriate herself in order to release her from the erasing movements of male hands and eyes. As a result of this self-recovery, women may dissolve the limit between reality (everyday situations) and fantasy (desire) that was imposed by male syntax. Women's desire, which starts in the realm of fantasy (Imaginary Order), is transferred to the sphere of reality, a reality now infiltrated by/with feminine influence.

Desire, a motivating force of writing, produces a series of textual reflexes. A text written by a woman is a metaphorical inscription of herself who constantly "writes" her own desires, thoughts, and experiences. In other words, women's writings become textual bodies in which their authors' identities are inscribed in their texts. Initially, these identities were shaped as "fictional truths" because they were constructed and defined on the bases of patriarchal paradigms. Women, in the act of writing, experience their desires, confront their own reality, and accept, as valid, only those truths constructed by themselves. One of the most common forms of writing women use to (re)write themselves and celebrate their experiences is the epistolary genre. Generally, a woman writes letters because she has been relegated to silence; female passion is transgressive, woman is considered "disorder," and her discourses of desire have been repressed. Women are, literally or metaphorically, exiled, imprisoned, confined, cloistered, or silenced. Women write letters to transgress the unjust law of repression and silencing: "Transgression lies in telling" (Kauffman 22). Epistolary discourse thus combines writing and revolt, defiance and desire; "Writing is the revolution" (Kauffman 22). Epistolary writing is pervaded with desire, which poses a radical challenge to the traditional approaches to authorship, authority, production, referentiality, and representation. Since the epistolary genre is a private, particular

confessional form of writing, letters subvert the ideology of authorship because, according to Kauffman, they do not confirm the traditional injunctions of paternity, lineage, and genealogy characteristic of the Western patriarchal canon. Janet Altman summarizes the features of epistolary texts that usually combine elements regarded as opposites:

The heroine's discourse is meant as a performance to be spoken, a letter to be read; she utters her desire in the absence of the beloved. The narrative consists of events reported by the heroine to the lover; it is oblique and elliptical because we frequently see only the repercussions of events that, like the love affair itself, are never narrated [. . .] the heroine's writing reenacts seduction, confession, persuasion, and these constitute what "happens" in the text. (209)

A woman who writes letters is a heroine because she uses her desire to transform herself from victim to artist in the process. As an artist in the process of recuperating her desire, the heroine's "style, subjectivity, and intertextuality are the motives for and subjects of her writing" (Kauffman 26). Since epistolary discourse subverts many conventional situations and explores so many transgressions and transformations, the act of women writing letters often deals with doubleness, duplicity, difference, and dissimulation in order to invalidate male rules. The heroines of the epistolary writing are those who assume their desire and subvert the paradigms of a patriarchal, oppressive society by the texts they produce.

3. The Writing Page: From Object to Subject

As an outgrowth of feminism, feminism claims to value literary texts differently from patriarchy. In doing so, feminism undermines the texts patriarchy asserts or the hierarchical oppositions (man/woman) on which it relies. Its main function consists of deconstructing the binary opposition man/woman in order to produce a significant displacement. Feminism

is not about destroying the opposition, but about undoing and displacing it, situating it differently. This feminist displacement not only vindicates marginal contexts, but subverts the distinctions between man and woman, in and out, presence and absence. The feminist ideology of literary creation stems from vindication of the marginal. This is an identification of the exclusions on which binary oppositions depend. The core of feminist literary creation relies on the change between the binary paradigms of man-superior and those of women-inferior inherent to patriarchal culture. In traditional literary creation, women have been a textual representation created by a male other. However, feminist writing is the product of a female self who creates her own experience and tells it to the world and to herself. Feminist writing subverts male impositions and creates a new space for self-recovery and self-expression. In the answering of some fundamental questions, a woman may start the process of identity change: what if the page did not want to be submissive? What if it refused to be the recipient of a predetermined signifier? Is it possible to change its position so that it can generate the flow of words? Can the woman-page become the active agent in the production of a text? Does she have the power to (re)write herself? Female authorship now implies all the signifying and creative power that a text carries within. This female textual body, nevertheless, is recognized as a confrontation against a patriarchal text which breaks with the traditional concept that every signifier is unitary and structured and, hence, closed to any new position and interpretation. That is, the phallogentric order of the Western world supposes that all signifiers carry within a transcendental, definite meaning--the "Signifier." All truths come from a transcendental "Truth" which is the beginning and the end of the chain of all signifiers. Therefore, any textual meaning is created by a "God" who is the almighty author of signifiers since that transcendental meaning closes the possibilities of expanding any process of signification.

Nevertheless, feminist authorship is a process of constant movement which refracts closed meaning, opening it up to ambiguity and

multiplicity of interpretations. This subversive act of disclosure and constant movement is the Derridean concept of writing⁵ based upon eternal displacement of a final signifier. Based upon her own experiences, the woman-text constructs a self that breaks and undoes the paternal "transcendental Truth" of a perpetual signifier. She refuses to be an object of the other's truth. The woman-page is now "folded:" she reflects and looks at herself as an undone entity in the process of transformation and apprehension. The role she decides to play and the truths she memorizes are rejected by the language and the exigencies of the other who wants to subdue her to the point of silence and paralysis. She is not a page looking for a pen anymore. The woman-page stops being an object relegated to muteness and invisibility and becomes a subject. In other words, she is translated to the active position of creator, desiring being, and author of meaning. She becomes the writer of her own text and the sculptor of her own destiny because "the subject is the writing subject [. . .] her product as well as her producer" (Wright 135). The woman-page fights against the demands of the other who imposed on her the signification of patriarchy. However, by appropriation of her "womanist" (feminist) discourse, the woman-page triumphantly assumes her role as the writing subject who is the creation as well as the creator of her own fate.

As a supplement or marginal constituent of the phallogentric order, the female element has a double position of inclusion/exclusion, difference/sameness in the patriarchal order, the effect of which is to subvert its paradigms of exploitation and discrimination. Rachel Plau DuPlessis asserts that "woman is neither wholly 'subcultural' nor, certainly, wholly main-cultural, but negotiates difference and sameness, marginality and inclusion in a constant dialogue, which takes shape variously in the various authors, but with one end--a rewriting of gender in dominant fiction" (43). Therefore, female discourse is a double-voiced discourse. To a certain extent, a woman cannot avoid imitation and her participation in phallogentricism: every woman who takes part in society inevitably has

some relation and association with patriarchal rules. Likewise, every time a woman speaks, she has the accent of a marginal being. The female self, as an intonation of “otherness” inside the dominating system, moves the game of difference along these two spaces--the dominating and the marginal--and subverts male signification by transforming and creating new signifying discursive processes. Indeed, writing sets the elements of signification in motion as a means to subvert traditional discourses. Feminist writing is thus considered a constructing process of women’s subjectification. In traditional patriarchal contexts, women are represented as mere objects of men’s ownership. By subverting this patriarchal “truth,” women are not formed on the basis of male maxims, but transformed in active elements of society.

4. The Subversive Page: Feminist Politics and Sexuality

When feminine writing emphasizes the marginal aspect of the signifying process, it becomes a subversive act. It becomes an unweaving of the conventional male constructions that have oppressed and exploited women so far. This process stands as a “demaximization”⁶ of fictions (male maxims) that the dominant order holds as true. In the representation and creation of feminine writing, the rupture of female participation with the patriarchal order is mainly depicted in the subversion of women’s experiences and in the insurrection of women writers against traditional literary structures. In fictional texts, this revolutionary activity might be manifested in different ways: as a feminist reinterpretation of the patriarchal narrative process; as the (re) construction of women’s identity within the traditional male (con)text; or as a (re)writing of women’s life in terms of sexuality and womanist experiences.

4.1 The reinterpretation of the narrative process:

Recurrent old concepts such as power, mination, capacity, and so on, which

have supported the phallogocentric order so far, are indelibly reread as objects of new, transformational interpretations. Feminine writing opens up possibilities to a new literary “script”: loving a man is not the only motivating force for the woman. She, who always acted out of sacrifice and love for the other, now acts unquestionably by/for/to herself. Woman does so by reappropriating her words with new revolutionary infusions of meaning in order to undermine the impositions of male paradigms. For instance, institutions formed and ruled by the patriarchal system, such as marriage and family, are understood in a different way by feminist writing. Conventional resolution for the female character (in literature) is either marriage (legalization to enter into the ruling culture) or death (suppression of the marginal culture). R. Blau DuPlessis affirms that “[m]arriage celebrates the ability to negotiate with sexuality and kinship; death is caused by inabilities or improprieties in this negotiation, a way of deflecting attention from man-made social norms to cosmic sanctions” (4). According to DuPlessis, writings by women aim at subverting the phallogocentric order and deconstructing the binary oppositions that have supported the patriarchal system and, consequently, have infected such writing with its rules and impositions. In this deconstructive process, women start a dialectic voyage between the realm of the marginal and the dominant, of silence and voice, of absence and presence, of the heterosexual and the homoerotic, of power and submission. They move along these spaces--apparently exclusive domains of the phallogocentric order--and show how the marginal area resides in the dominating terrain, silence is heard in the uttered voice, absence contains the traces of presence, and submission is assumed as a strategic device to subvert male power. Nevertheless, the purpose of feminine writing is to subvert this phallogocentric paradigm of power and oppression in order to construct a new sexual politics based on respect, acceptance, and appropriation of the bases of production and representation. The main task of feminist writing is to destroy the sexist mystification of women’s experience and accept that women are different from men.

They think and act differently from men, they conceptualize power differently; therefore, women have a different value system. Feminist writing expresses openly women's value system and empowers them to transform their lives and the world that oppresses them.

4.2 The (re)construction of women's identity within the traditional male (con) text:

Women writers also subvert patriarchal texts with powerful acts of self-definition and self-assumption. Women (re)define their texts according to new feminist patterns and write themselves. The "official" narrative imposed on language is now superseded by discourses saturated with feminine elements such as tactile and visual sensations lost in the preoedipal stage of the Imaginary register. Women bravely dare to see themselves and, in that way, they celebrate their womanhood. Women refuse to be seen and judged by the other and assume the possibility to reappropriate themselves as free human beings. This liberated kind of woman has broken apart what Lacan calls "the scopic drive":

This drive involves both the eye--the organ of vision and watching--and the gaze--the sense of being judged as separate from the eye. Lacan suggests that the gap or split between the eye and the gaze manifests the scopic drive in the subject, who is trying to fill a lack or absence in being. 'The gaze,' says Lacan, 'is presented to us only in the form of a strange contingency, symbolic of what we find on the horizon, as the thrust of our experience, namely the lack that constitutes castration anxiety'. (Mellard 119)

In the process of inscribing feminine writing, women accordingly dissolve the sight of the other that has defined them so far. Women constitute themselves through a reflexive process of self-discovery. As formerly indicated, many women write letters as a tangible autobiographical text placed in life. These confessional texts are generally mirrors that reflect the authorial work that real female writers do: their texts also represent female "fictional truths" that subtly

subvert patriarchal, social, and literary canons. Male characters, as traditional representatives of paternal inheritance, are sometimes absent in the feminine writing process. On the other hand, other women, as comrades of struggle, actively appear in feminist writing. These women do not need the authorization of the other to define themselves. They do not need to be seen and judged by the other in order to assume their womanhood. Therefore, they want to suppress the Lacanian scopic drive. Indeed, female characters textualize and write themselves, metaphorically, by means of their own sight, with the help of mirrors and other ocular substitutes⁷. These female characters transcend the textual body and inscribe their own female identity. In this process of self-inscription, women authorize themselves, that is, woman, seen before as the passive, silent page, now becomes author, and in this process, she authorizes herself (takes control) to write (to produce signification).

5. Subversive sexuality and the (re) writing of women's lives:

One of the ways women subvert patriarchal constructions is by reaffirming their sexuality to others. By incorporating new insurrectional significations into their sexuality, women redefine their lives within a male-dominated context, that is, they rewrite their own lives. In fact, many institutions, individuals, and socio-political structures promote and perpetuate sexism against women. Worst of all, victims themselves are compelled by behaving in complicity and in accord with patriarchal supremacy and the status quo. Patriarchal structures encourage women to believe they have no intrinsic value: according to patriarchy, women become valuable only when bonding with men. Male supremacy teaches society to believe that women relating to members of their own sex are worthless and that those bondings diminish female experiences rather than enriching them. Nevertheless, some women have become conscious of the power of women-identifying-women relationships by

deconstructing patriarchal constructions and learning to live in solidarity. Women have claimed for themselves the unique meaning of *sisterhood*. Since some of them are divided by sexist, racist, and classist prejudices, among others, women have to eliminate those barriers that separate them and construct, as sisters, the true meaning of sorority:

Solidarity strengthens resistance struggle. There can be no mass-based feminist movement to end sexist oppression without a united front--women must take the initiative and demonstrate the power of solidarity. Unless we can show that barriers separating women can be eliminated, that solidarity can exist, we cannot hope to change and transform society as a whole. (Hooks, *Feminist Theory* 44)

In order to grow in solidarity and sisterhood, women have to stop feeling like “victims” and start exercising control over their lives. According to bell hooks, an assertive feminist movement, in which sorority and common help are exalted, has to promote women’s self-affirmation and true appropriation of their own abilities to transform their lives and their environment. Therefore, women have to bond with one another, not in terms of the degree of each one’s victimization, but according to the strengths and resources they share as members of a community. For hooks, it is the “essence of Sisterhood” (45) to give women the courage to relate to other sisters in terms of their power to struggle and survive.

This woman-identifying-woman bond is a rich spectrum of possibilities that allows women to face reality from different angles. From a literal perspective, these relationships are truly “womanist” because women bond in order to create a unique feeling of self-love and self-acceptance. Real sisters are those women who love “other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciate and prefer women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility [. . .] Sometimes love individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female” (Walker, *In Search* xi). This is a very broad definition of “sister” according to Alice Walker’s radical perspective of the term “womanist.”

Women creatively relate to other women at different levels of sharing and interchange as in quilting and talking about everyday issues. The concept “womanist” is the basis of the theory of Adrienne Rich’s “lesbian continuum” and “lesbian existence.” Rich’s perspective offers a new vision of personal and political bonding among women. She argues that the true value and significance of women’s bonding has been lost because of the pressures and hostility of patriarchy, which stresses heterosexuality as the only source of happiness, social success, and personal fulfillment. This insistence of patriarchy on enthroning heterosexuality as the only true and valid source for happiness and success is what Rich calls “Compulsory Heterosexuality.”⁸

Compulsory heterosexuality does not give women-identified-women bonding the meaning it deserves. Postulating that the (pre)historic bonding between mothers and daughters had been forcibly interrupted by the entrance of sons to this one-to-one relationship, Rich develops her concept of lesbian continuum as a political affiliation that can restore those lost same-sex loyalties by uniting and gathering women in a mutual, woman-focused vision. As Adrienne Rich states, the term lesbian continuum includes:

a range—through each woman’s life and throughout history—of woman-identified experience, not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman. If we expand it to embrace many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support. (239)

The lesbian continuum directly confronts women’s oppression, and with that attitude, Rich suggests a (re)writing of culture and a (re)opening of new perspectives and possibilities for women.

Rich’s lesbian continuum expands the spectrum of lesbianism beyond sexual intercourse, to women’s friendship and sisterly solidarity. As she explains, “women identification is a source of energy, a potential springhead of female power, curtailed and contained under the institution of heterosexuality” (244). Indeed,

lesbian continuum is not a neologism about “woman-loving-women” but a broader model of female identification. This type of identification is subversive and transformational because it deconstructs the paradigms of our patriarchal society; it is politically significant because it subverts masculine cultural modes to approach womanhood and, therefore, (re)writes, in one way or another, social and cultural structures, institutions, and the ideology of the dominant order. The lesbian continuum system is a strategic cultural device that permits the invisible to become visible, and in that way, places the marginalized at the center of the political stage.

In short, we can conclude that women’s histories and experiences are (re)written by their subversion of the hegemonic order. While women used to be completely silenced and effaced through history, now, women center on themselves and, in that way, they replot their own texts. Each woman is able to reappropriate her own experiences and (re)inscribe a “herstory”⁹ In sum, women struggle to create a free self, break the prejudices about class, race, sexual, and gender ideologies to which they have been subjected by means of filial encounters with other women who understand, support, and share their life intricacies.

End Notes

- 1 This is a term from French Feminism, *Écriture Féminine*, signifying a particular kind of writing that undermines the ideology and truths of the dominant order. Hélène Cixous does not provide any definition for this term because a definition would limit and control the plenitude and openness of such writing. For more detailed analysis of this concept see Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément’s *The Newly Born Woman*.
- 2 In “Emphasis Added,” Nancy K. Miller defines a “maxim” as a truth stated and defined as such by patriarchy. Words like “sensible” and “emotional” are words ascribed to women and femininity because patriarchy says so. Miller states that the intentions of these maxims are both political and literary.
- 3 The term “phallogocentric” refers to the order in which the phallus is the male center from which other significations derive. According to Lacan, the phallus is symbolic and represents the power of the “privileged signifier” (*Ecrits* 287).
- 4 The Lacanian theory used in this essay is taken from his works *Ecrits* and *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. Lacan’s poetics refers to the narrative that focuses upon the I’s (*moi*) identity quest, and thus uses language to (re)construct this quest. By setting characters in opposition, for example, a text might dramatize the diversity of *moi*’s voices and their dialectical disjunctions in relation to the desire of the Other.
- 5 According to the deconstructive model, writing stands for the external, physical, and the nontranscendental, and “the threat posed by writing is that the operations of what should be merely a means of expression might affect or infect the meaning it is supposed to represent” (Culler 91). The writing act serves as a mediator to reconcile the ambiguities of speech. “Writing presents language as a series of physical marks that operate in the absence of the speaker” (91).he main goal of the writing act is to contemplate thought the way it really is. See Jonathan Culler’s *On Deconstruction* 89-110.
- 6 Nancy K. Miller employs the term “demaximization” to indicate the unweaving process of male experience decodification that holds itself as a universal truth. This concept thus refers to the deconstruction of patriarchal conventions as one aspect among the broad spectrum of “truths” in the reality of cultural and social phenomena. See Miller’s “Emphasis Added” in *The New Feminist Criticism* 341.
- 7 According to Jacques Lacan in “The Mirror-phase as Formative of the Function of the I,” women’s use of scopie elements is closely related to the Lacanian “mirror stage.” The child constructs his own image, at an early age, by identifying himself with his reflection in the mirror: “We have only to understand the mirror-phase *as an identification*, in the full sense which analysis gives to the term: namely, the transformation which takes place in the subject when he assumes an image—whose predestination to this phase-effect is sufficiently indicated by the use, in analytical theory, of the old term *imago*” (*Ecrits* 72). This identification leads the child to recognize that he is a divided self, that he is in dissonance with his own reality.

8 Bell Hooks also defines the obsession of heterosexism as the “suppression and denial of homosexuality with the assumption that everyone is or should be heterosexual and, second, a belief in the inherent superiority of the dominant-male/passive-female role pattern. Heterosexism results in compulsory heterosexuality which cripples the free expression and mutually supportive relationships of heterosexuals as well as of lesbians and gay men.” See hook’s *Feminist Theory* 151.

9 *Herstory*, opposed to history, refers to feminist fiction concerned with sexism, sexual politics and the historical effects of racism and patriarchal gender on the lives of women. The term *herstory* is taken from Alice Walker’s feminist prose. See especially *In Search of our Mothers’ Garden*.

Works Cited

- Altman, Janet G. 1983. *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form*. Columbus: Ohio State UP.
- Cixous, Hélène and Catherine Clément. 1985. *The Newly Born Woman*. Manchester: U of Manchester P.
- Clayton, Jay. 1993. *The Pleasures of Babel: Contemporary American Literature and Theory*. New York: Oxford UP.
- Culler, Jonathan. 1982. *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism After Structuralism*. Ithaca: Cornell UP.
- DuPlessis, Rachel Blau. 1985. *Writing Beyond the Ending*. Bloomington: Indiana UP.
- Gilbert, Sandra M. and Susan Gubar. 1979. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven: Yale UP.
- Hooks, Bell. 1984. *Feminist Theory : From Margin to Center*. Boston: South End Press.
- Irigaray, Luce. 1985. *Speculum of the Other Woman*. Trans. Gillian C. Gill. Ithaca: Cornell UP.
- Kauffman, Linda S. 1986. *Discourses of Desire: Gender, Genre, and Epistolary Fictions*. Ithaca: Cornell UP.
- Lacan, Jacques. 1977. *Ecrits: A Selection*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: W.W. Norton.
- , 1981. *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Mellard, James M. 1991. *Using Lacan, Reading Fiction*. Urbana: U of Illinois P.
- Miller, Nancy K. “Emphasis Added: Plots and Pausibilities in Women’s Fiction.” 1985. *The New Feminist Criticism*. Ed. Elaine Showalter. New York: Pantheon Books. 339-360.
- Rich, Adrienne. “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence.” 1993. *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*. Eds. Henry Abelove et al. New York: Routledge. 227-254.
- Walker, Alice. 1984. *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*. Great Britain: The Women’s Press Limited.
- Wittig, Monique. “The Mark of Gender.” 1986. *Poetics of Gender*. Ed. Nancy K. Miller. New York: Columbia UP. 63-73.
- Wright, Elizabeth. 1984. *Psychoanalytic Criticism: Theory to Practice*. London: Methuen.