

Looking at Helene Cixous from Indian Perspectives

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Abstract

This paper takes into consideration, the theory of feminism as represented by Helene Cixous in her essay “Castration or Decapitation?” and “The Laugh of the Medusa”. I have attempted to reread her feminist theory, keeping in mind the Indian perspective. I attempted to bring up the difference between the history of French regarding women and the rich cultural history of the women of India. However in spite of having a very proud history regarding women, India is also struggling with the same issues as that of French. I have taken the Indian mythology as well as the female freedom fighters into consideration. The issue of education, economic independence, the idea of decision making, freedom to have ones own voice for women has been dominantly discussed. Indian drama and poetry representing the ordeals of women which they are facing in contemporary society, their fight against the deep rooted patriarchy has been extensively discussed. Helene Cixous also talks about the solutions which need to be pondered upon. There is a constant reference to the “laugh”, which is of courage and victory, it is an essential attribute of a woman’s persona.

Keywords- Women, struggle, ordeals, Indian mythology, drama, poetry, laugh, French, courage, education, patriarchy, feminist theory, decision making, victory.

In the beginning of the essay “Castration or Decapitation”, Helene Cixous raise the question of who enjoys the greater sexual pleasure, a man or a woman? She takes up the example of Zeus and Hera, the ultimate couple who were unable to answer this question .This thorough going argument brings in Tiresias to arbitrate, he was the blind seer who enjoyed the uncommon fortune of having lived seven years as a woman and seven years as a man.He answered that : “If sexual pleasure could be divided up into ten parts, nine of them would be the woman’s.” Taking up this narrative when we talk about the Indian culture, we tend to across hundreds of narratives which talk about the sexuality of women. The tale of Lord Vishnu,who disguised himself as Mohini in order to seduce Lord Shiva .Women always had an upper hand in terms of sexuality, most often they were compelled to use their sexuality as a weapon to rule over the male dominion.

She later brings up another question “What is woman for man?” Well sometimes an object for sexual pleasure and sometimes simply an inspiration. This still remains a big question for psychoanalysts debates. Here Helene Cixous talks of a little Chinese story, which she borrowed from Sun Tse’s manual of strategy, which is a kind of handbook for the warrior. In this story the King commanded General Sun Tse: “You who are a great strategist and claim to be able to train anybody in the arts of war.....take my wives(all one hundred and eighty of them !) and make soldiers out of them.” In this whole exercise women failed to learn by simple commands and only laughed at his instructions but when they were threatened of getting beheaded they followed each and every word meticulously. This reminds me of the Great Indian warrior “The Queen of Jhansi”, she herself without any sort of male intervention managed to train a whole army of women to fight against the British. Here she stands as an inspiration for millions. A British soldier mentioned the same incident in his autobiography stating that: “The Queen of Jhansi was the most dangerous and bravest of all the freedom fighters”. Here this man was completely mesmerized by the caliber and courage this woman had, which is certainly remarkable.

Later she brings up another question of “Where is she? Is there any such thing as woman?”. She brings up another story which seemed to her quite expressive of woman’s place : the story of Sleeping Beauty. She has always been found on a bed: Sleeping Beauty is lifted from her bed by a man because, as we all know , women don’t wake up by themselves : man has to intervene. She is lifted by the man who will lay her in her next bed so that she may be confined to bed ever after(Cixous). This assumption can be paralleled with the whole journey of a woman’s life in Indian Culture, where a woman has to live according to the will of her father till she is married off to a man and moves from one symbolic system to another. With her enormous capacity of adapting , she has to live according to the will of her husband and later the son. The male the family only has the capacity to frame the narrative regarding the symbolic system in order to construct the framework of the woman, the demarcation of her powers and limitations. Kierkegaard expresses his views on “woman’s existence” – or that part of it set aside for her by culture - in which he says he sees her as a sleeper. She sleeps, he says, and first love dreams her and then she dreams of love. From dream to dream , and always in second position.

Bringing up another story she says , though a woman can be found standing up, but not for long. Take Little Red Riding Hood as an example : it will not , I imagine, be lost on you that the “red riding hood” in question is a little clitoris,(trying to become or gain the power of the penis, but does not succeed) Little Red Riding Hood basically gets up to some mischief: she’s the little female sex that tries to play a bit and sets out with her little pot of butter and her little jar of honey. She goes from one house to another, from mother’s to the grandmother. Cixous says that grandmothers’ are always wicked: she is the bad mother who always shuts the daughter in whenever the daughter might by chance want to live or take pleasure.....she calls this behavior as jealousy of the woman who can’t let her daughter go.

When it comes to the woman's jealousy, I am reminded of many Indian texts which bring up this idea. In Anita Rao Badami's novel "Tamarind Mem", Saroja's mother was very alien to her, she was never found supporting any of her daughter's cause and she never allowed her to live her life according to her own will. Carol Ann Duffy recreates the story of the Little Red Riding Hood in terms of modern day culture. The female role is obscure behind the Wolf, but are reversed in Duffy's version. In Duffy's poem the little girl comes out to be the rebel where no obstructions can stop her to execute her own set of protocols.

Later Cixous talks about the transition of women between the two houses, between two beds. In terms of Little Red Riding Hood she is laid, ever caught in her chain of metaphors, metaphors that organize culture. This compels me to take up the issue of Indian marriage. According to what does a woman mean to her husband the difference, in the personality of both the counter-parts signify their social order. In the words of the writer the relationship between both can be established as: a woman is the moon to the masculine sun, nature to culture, concavity to masculine convexity, matter to form immobility/inertia to the march of progress, while man is obviously the active, the upright, the productive. It is quite clear that in the institution of marriage both the counter-parts complete each other. I would like to bring in some mythic elements to accentuate the essence of my argument, the "Ardhanarishwara" avatar of Lord Shiva explains the essence of marriage to its fullest. The coming together of Shiva and Shakti explains the equality of men and women in social milieu.

Cixous considers history as the dualist hierarchical and of classic opposition. But in contrast to her views the history of women particularly in Indian culture is extremely rich. Women always had a very strong hold of their opinion Indian culture is the only culture in the world where goddesses are worshipped with immense grandeur. Women have always played the role of a creator as well as the destroyer, she is the mother, the nurturer and the fierce one who even accepts the sacrifices. She is considered to be the one who has blessed men of their power. She has hundreds of roles to play. The mother-goddess Durga, the wife-Parvati, the destroyer-Mahakali, the ever calm and goddess of knowledge-Saraswati, the synonym of wealth-Goddess Laxmi. Indian culture has always given women the utmost position, but the evidences are available only till Vedic times. After the advent of invaders the conditions of women changed drastically.

The writer later brings up the role of language in the social order. She says "We are already caught up in masculine interrogation", where the woman is administered by the man like the police interrogates the criminal. Due to his domination he has become the master and is able to manipulate the women by using the language of the power to oppress the world of women, simply by depriving her from the right to education. The man is becoming self-obsessed they only consider their own presumptions without any consideration regarding the input of women.

Old Lacan says “what does she want?”, when he says. “a woman cannot speak of her pleasure”, most interesting it is all there a woman cannot is unable, hasn’t the power. She has been deprived of speaking. She is considered out of symbolic, she is considered nothing without a man without his power, there is lack of her individuality, she enters the structure of subjectivity once she comes in contact with the phallus and therefore becomes the “transcendental signifier”, in the same way as the man becomes the part of symbolic functioning by castration. She is considered to be suffering from the castration complex, or the lack of phallus. This is very evident when the writer says she lacks lack?. Without the man she is considered to be in a state of distressing, distressed undifferentiation, unbordered unorganized and “unpoliced”, incoherent, chaotic and embedded in the imaginary in her ignorance of the law of the signifier she is like a shrew who needs to be tamed by her master who is always a man.

The writer says that the one who talks of her own ideology plays her own desires is a hysteric which is considered as a divine spirit that is always at the edge, the turning point of linking. This reminds me of Vijay Tendulkar’s play “Silence! The Court Is In Session” where the protagonist says that how her freedom, her intellect and her audacity to live her life on her own terms. Such a woman is considered as an unorganisable feminine construct whose power of producing the other is a power that never returns to her. And so to bring this hysteric to her own senses the man who’d plays his role. There was the man in the name of Professor Damle who subjugated Lila Benare. He himself stands as a person who attempts to extract all the power from a powerful woman by again using the physical aspect as his weapon there is another point about which we can talk about in this section that the capacity of a woman to become a mother becomes her biggest weakness. The question arises that in our culture whether it is Indian or French-fatherhood does not hold the same value in the eyes of people as that of motherhood. It was Kafka who said that was one struggle that terrified him beyond all others (he was an embattled man, but his battle was his death-in this sense he was a man greater than the rest: but in matters concerning women his was a struggle that terrified him where as death did not. There is a particular denotative meaning of his statement but there can be several connotative meanings derived from this fact. He says that the struggle with women ended up in bed this was his greatest fear. One connotative meaning which I can infer is that men think women can be controlled and can be brought on their terms by exploiting them sexually. Kafka was honest enough to reveal everything, to say everything.

The society has the kind of construct which conspires to consign women to mystery, as they say “keep her in her place” keep her at her distance: she is always not quite there but no one knows exactly where she is. There is a whole symbolic construct to talk and justify regarding the place of women in society, but there are no such specific guidelines for men. A woman should be coy, docile, softspoken, innocent, full of mannerisms, full of respect for the male fraternity. The question is who gave these characteristic features of the women personality and on what grounds. Are there any such characteristic features for men. Yes, a

man should be bold, full of muscle power and the one who can keep a woman upright in her duties. Who established this Marxist standardization it is still a much broader area of research.

Silence: Silence is the mark of hysteria. The great hysterics have lost speech, they are aphonic. They are de-capitated, their tongues are cut off and what talks isn't heard because it's the body that talks, and the man doesn't hear the body. This again reminds of the whole discourse of the play "Silence-The Court Is In Session" where throughout the discourse of the play Leela has been silenced. When she speaks there was nobody seems to be interested to listen to her. Same goes for Rukmani, a defined character of Partap Sharma's play "The Touch Of Brightness". She has always been seen as an object, nobody seems to be interested to listen to her thoughts.

At the end Helens Cixous brings up the solutions to make the condition of women better. She says that women, more than anything else should learn to love themselves at the first place. Raka is the perfect example of a free-spirited new age girl, from Anita Desai's novel "Fire On The Mountain". Another example comes from Carol Ann Duffy's poem "Little Red Cap" which also talks about the invincible spirit of a woman. The writer says that the women should re-write history according to their own perspective. The history of Indian culture regarding women is very rich, what we need to do is to re-establish that richness again. Later the writer says that women should speak and defellow centralize the body. Women have always spoken and have been side-lined, to gain authority there is a need to get a shift from being to assertive to dominative. Through these we can certainly bring about a shift in meta-language.

At the end Cixous that laughter is the ultimate weapon for women. She says, laughter that breaks out, overflows, a humour no one would expect to find in women-which is none the less surely their greatest strength. Whether it is the laugh of Medusae or the laugh of Draupadi in Mahashweta Devi's play "Draupadi". The laugh symbolizes the strength of a woman's personality and how the illogical oppression and physical exploitation cannot break her spirit. She is much above these physical aspects.

She says that women do not mourn, and this is where their pain lies! They are not even allowed to express their pain. One's you have mourned, it's all over after a year, there is no more suffering. This attribute of a woman's personality makes her writing, a body that overflows, disgorges, vomiting as opposed to masculine incorporation. She loses, and doubtless it would be to the death were it not for the intervention of those basic movements of a feminine unconscious, this is how Cixous defined feminine sublimity. It provides the capacity of passing above it all by means of a form of oblivion which is not the oblivion of burial or interment but the oblivion of acceptance. She basically takes up the challenge of loss in order to go on living: she lives it, gives it life, is capable of unsparing loss.

In the end of the essay, she discusses the most significant element, which she has also discussed separately in her essay named, "The Laugh of the Medusa". She used the myth of

medusa which signifies the laughter of victory and the assertive nature of a woman's personality. She ends her essay at a very positive note with an overwhelming laughter. She says that, culturally speaking, women have wept a great deal, but once the tears are shed, there will be endless laughter instead. Laughter that breaks out, overflows, a humor no one would expect to find in women - which are nonetheless surely their greatest strength because it's a humor that sees a man much further away than he has ever seen. She says that she is the one who laughs last and her first laugh is at herself.

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