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THE ROLE OF DIFFERENCE IN THE PRODUCTION OF IDENTITY. FEMINIST THEORIES AND GENDER DIFFERENCE

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Abstract: *This paper discusses the allotropies of difference in the complex process of identity production, focusing on the specific case of gender identity. The paper considers recent feminist theories as well as postmodern criticism in order to identify the various implications of difference in the construction of the self. A decisive evolution of the concept of difference from unproductively intrinsic to binary oppositions to its more productive acceptance as diversity is identified as crucial to the understanding of gender identity by contemporary theoretical discourse.*

Key words: *difference, identity, gender, postmodern, feminism.*

As Mark Currie pertinently remarks in his opening chapter of *Difference* (2004), difference contributes decisively to the production of meaning and of identity:

> […] the meaning of words is produced by their relation to each other and their differences […] personal identity also appears to have an undeniable relational component (Currie 2-3).

It is through difference that meaning is created and identity is produced. There is undoubtedly a marked interdependence between meaning and identity as both heavily rely on language; irrespective of the theory which one chooses to adopt on reality as either prior to language or, on the contrary, as an essentially discursive construct, one has to acknowledge the indissoluble bond which keeps together meaning, identity and language in a conceptual triad.

Since the present research focuses on the various modes of enunciation of difference in the discourse of contemporary British female writers, it is of crucial importance at this point to investigate the mechanisms through which difference participates in the construction of identity. Although, as previously mentioned, most dictionary definitions choose to oppose difference to identity, placing the two terms in a relation of antinomy, identity cannot be conceived outside the conceptual frame of difference. Debates on the issue of identity have in turns inflamed various areas of the Western thought, including philosophy, anthropology, psychology, generally oscillating between the pre-eminence of either the psychological or the social component of the concept, whilst more recent theories agree on identity as being the result of a complex combination of the two.

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There is, however, considerable constancy in grasping the paradoxical character of identity, its dynamic nature, as a product of an ongoing process of differentiation between sameness and otherness. Essentially, contemporary thought has agreed that the mechanism of identity formation relies on dialectic relations, which basically leads to the understanding of identity as a process, one that is consequently under permanent construction. This new vision does certainly oppose the classical, essentialist, Cartesian conception which dominated the classical age and according to which identity was a given. Descartes's inflexible and all-knowing Self which by thinking benefits from an immediate, absolute and transparent experience of itself is replaced by a more problematic Self which is constructed from a myriad of variables; thus, history, sociology, psychology and anthropology all contribute to the emergence of the Self, whose essential traits become transformation and change. The Self can no longer conceive of itself without conceiving of the Other first, because only by knowing the Other can the Self know itself. Thus, difference becomes crucial to the process of identity formation as it allows the Self to permanently recognize itself by contrasting its attributes to those of others.

In *Selves at Risk* (1990), Ihab Hassan insists upon the constructed nature of identity and refers to the process of identity formation as an ongoing process of differentiation:

> […] this process of differentiation creates the 'I', the self, which exists both in connection with other 'Is' and in a state of terrifying isolation (Hassan 9).

Likewise, in an essay entitled *Who needs identity?*, Stuart Hall echoes Hassan's statement by claiming that even though identity originally stems from the recognition of a common pool of characteristics that several individuals share, its essential discursive aspect renders it unavoidably tributary to the manoeuvres of differentiation:

> […] because identities are constructed within, not outside discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices…they emerge as the product of the marking of difference and exclusion (Hall in *Identities: A Reader* ed. du Gay et. al. 17).

Feminist critics Sally Alexander and Sally Robinson make similar observations on the interdependence of difference and identity, contextualizing the discussion within the framework of sexual and gender identity:

> […] subjectivity, and with it sexual identity, is constructed through a process of differentiation, division and splitting, and is best understood as a process which is always in the making, is never finished or complete (Alexander in *British Feminist Thought* ed. Lovell 34).

Sally Robinson notes in discussing these issues that subjectivity, like gender, is a "doing," rather than a being. Subjects are constituted, differentially, across complex and mobile discursive practices in historically specific ways that involve relations of subjectivity to sociality, to power and to knowledge (Robinson 11):

> […] categorization works through processes of inclusion and exclusion, and "membership" in any category is secured through the exclusion of "outsiders." In this sense, any "identity" must necessarily exclude differences: the One is not, nor can it be, the Other. Yet, in another sense, identity is dependent on difference: the One is only the One in opposition to the Other (Robinson 5).

In a similar vein, in her *Postmodern Revaluations,* Professor Mihaela Irimia concludes that 'difference is a guarantee of identity, it signals both the static and dynamic processes of identity formation' (Irimia 8).

If in establishing generic identity, the role that difference plays is perhaps not so much exposed to observation, in tracing any type of specific identity such as racial, sexual or gender identity, difference exits the backstage and assumes the leading role. Moreover, the contemporary episteme and its various theoretical expressions have witnessed an increasing centrality of the concept of identity as this has become more and more unstable and prone to fluidity.

In this respect, the editors of the 2000 anthology *Identity: A Reader* discuss the immense popularity and centrality that identity has acquired within the past few decades and establish that a major role in this process has been held by the historical and socio-cultural changes that have profoundly affected the public and private spheres:

> […] identity has achieved its contemporary centrality both theoretically and substantively because that to which it is held to refer-whether the 'it' in question is, for example the category 'man', 'black', 'work', 'nation' or 'community'-is regarded in some sense as being more contingent, fragile and incomplete and thus more amenable to reconstitution than was previously thought possible (Du Gay, Evans, Redman 2).

Nevertheless, despite its contemporary centrality in the discourse of the humanities, identity as a concept has gradually liquefied in the sense that it has lost its solidity and has therefore become problematic. Within the theoretical framework of postmodernism, it is increasingly difficult to confine identity to a definition, as the concept seems to have entered an era of shifting attributes. It has become nearly impossible nowadays to define identity, as definition presupposes a static frame, whereas, as a process, identity is essentially dynamic and under continuous transformation. Contemporary theories have therefore displaced their focus from defining identity to investigating the complex mechanisms of identity formation. And since these mechanisms are practically inexhaustible, identity has gained a central locus amongst the preoccupations of the contemporary episteme. Thus, philosophers and theorists have turned their attention to what they have identified as the key-components of the fluid entity that is identity. Issues of sex, gender, race, social status and historical background have started to gain primacy in the contemporary discourse, giving birth to new fields of research.

In a chapter of her analysis of the *Poetics of Postmodernism,* meaningfully entitled *Subject in/of/to history and his story,* Linda Hutcheon speaks of the "trendiness" that the issue of the subject has acquired in both contemporary criticism and literature (Hutcheon 158).

In addition, she claims that what postmodernism essentially does with respect to the subject is not to destroy it as many theorists have loudly proclaimed but to situate it. And 'to situate it, as postmodernism teaches, is to recognize differences—of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and so on' (Hutcheon 159).

Thus, gender identity and consequently gender difference have acquired a privileged status, especially as a result of the pre-eminence of this issue within the radical discourse of feminism and the subsequent inauguration of Gender Studies Departments at leading universities in the United States and Europe. It is also a major

concern of the present research to analyse the ways in which gender differences are articulated in the fictional discourse of contemporary British female writers. It becomes therefore important to make a few theoretical remarks on the concept of gender and to dissociate it from the concept of sex to which it is often assimilated.

It is without a doubt the merit of the French philosopher and revolutionary feminist Simone de Beauvoir to have operated the ground-breaking distinction between sex and gender in her most celebrated work *The Second Sex* (1949). Conceived as an apology of the female condition, *The Second Sex* has since become the foundational tract of contemporary feminism. The chief statements that de Beauvoir formulates in her seminal work revolve around woman's symptomatic marginality and her subsequent invisibility in the public sphere as well as around the constructed feature of the gender category, explicitly articulated in the consecrated phrase 'one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman' (de Beauvoir 301). The undisputable value of de Beauvoir's theoretical efforts consist primarily in their capacity to have generated a moral revolution amongst other female writers and not only. Her existentialist creed according to which existence precedes essence can be clearly discerned in her considerations about the nature of sex and gender. Thus, she anticipates in many ways the theoretical endeavours of writers such as Germaine Greer or Judith Butler whose feminism relies upon the distinction between sex and gender.

Subsequent feminist theories have postulated that gender presents a defining historically constructed essence whereas sex is reduced to previously inscribed biological information. Moreover, in the light of these theories, gender is prone to obey certain social power relations which contribute to gender identification. The difference between gender and sex only becomes visible to the others when there is a marked incongruence between the two, which leads to the so-called queer identity, generally perceived as a transgression of gender boundaries.

Recent feminist theories abound in analyses of gender and gender-related issues, although originally, feminism had built its case on the importance of sexual difference as the site of women's discrimination. According to feminist critic Rosi Braidotti for instance, feminism borrows, through metaphorical proximity, the defining attributes of a question that has sexual difference as its answer:

> […] feminism is the movement that brings into practice the dimension of sexual difference through the critique of gender as a power institution. Feminism is the question; the affirmation of sexual difference is the answer (Braidotti in *Writing on the Body* ed. Conboy, Medina, Stanbury 61).

Thus, contemporary feminist theories perceive gender as the site of women's oppression as it entails power relations which always render the woman inferior, weak, passive, negative. Feminists' main goal is therefore to expose the artificiality of gender as a human construct meant to discipline and regulate human behaviour and relations. In the masculine/feminine binary, the supporters of these theories claim that the feminine has always been represented as the negative. Investigations into the history of Western thought have thus revealed that from very ancient times, the philosophical and historical discourses which represented the main coordinates of the Western episteme have agreed to either completely disregard the existence of women or to refer to them as the under-evolved, inferior, under-developed members of the human species.

In this respect, the seminal study of Genevieve Lloyd, which looks at the various accounts of women's existence in the history of Western philosophy, is fairly illustrative as it exposes the utterly negative role which women were cast into throughout centuries of philosophical enquiry. Thus, starting from Plato and Aristotle, who configured Woman as an embodiment of the irrational forces of Nature that was to be overcome and eventually dominated by the superior mechanisms of Reason, the ultimate human faculty, the history of Western philosophy abounds in examples which support the idea of a constructed, weak and inferior female gender. Lloyd's historical account of how gender was constructed throughout centuries of philosophical abuse is paralleled by Moira Gatens's study on *Feminism and Philosophy* (1991) which seeks to investigate the epistemological mechanisms through which women were underprivileged by the discourse of Western philosophy. Thus, far more than agreeing with other feminists in considering the relation between feminism and philosophy as essentially oppressive, Gatens goes further and claims that dichotomies are in themselves oppressive through their inherent capacity of generating hierarchies.

Feminists have described gender in many ways, but they all seem to agree on its artificial nature which derives from its being a human construct. In this respect, Sally Robinson notes:

> […] the question of how one becomes a woman has been complicated by recent critiques of the "subject" and "identity" as ideological fictions necessary for the smooth workings of humanist systems of thought and social regulation (Robinson 1),

making explicit reference to the role that philosophy has performed in the firm establishment of gender as an apparently "natural" category whose function is primarily to discriminate. Following a similar logic, Hester Eisenstein insists on making the distinction between sex and gender in her enquiry into *Contemporary Feminist Thought* (1983):

> […] conceptually, then, it was possible to make a distinction between sex and gender. Sex meant the biological sex of a child--was it born anatomically a male or a female member of the human species? Gender was the culturally and socially shaped cluster of expectations, attributes, and behaviours assigned to that category of human being by the society into which the child was born (Eisenstein 7).

French feminism has witnessed the emergence of quite revolutionary theories on the production of female sexuality and identity. The works of remarkable thinkers such as Luce Irigaray, Helene Cixous or Julia Kristeva have made an important contribution to the overall evolution of feminist theories, being less concerned with political doctrine and more interested to explore the philosophical and metaphorical aspects of being a woman.

Drawing on psychoanalysis and particularly on Freud and Lacan, Luce Irigaray elaborates an intriguing account of female sexuality which, according to her, has always been subject to the uses and abuses of phallogocentrism. As a consequence, in *This Sex Which Is Not One* Irigaray suggests that 'female sexuality has always been conceptualized on the basis of masculine parameters' (Irigaray 23) and proposes a theory of difference which would conceptually liberate woman from the tyranny of the male discourses about her. Just like Helene Cixous, Irigaray works for the creation of a language of women (*ecriture feminine*) which would

do justice to women's experience. Irigaray claims that what people have grown accustomed to call today the female gender is nothing else but an extension of the male gender, just as the biblical Eve is an extension of the primordial Man, Adam. In fact, the only universal referent remains the male.

As a consequence, she advocates the creation of two, autonomous and equally important sexes which would entail the creation of two autonomous genders, each with its own language and discourse.

To continue, postmodernist feminism heavily develops on the theory of difference and proposes the abandonment of the phallogocentric categories and hierarchies altogether in order to give women the possibility to speak and be heard in a conceptual space liberated from the dominance of patriarchal thought. Judith Butler's seminal studies on the constructedness and oppressiveness of gender as a socially created artifice are of particular interest to the present research as they expose the unreliability of gender as a concept for feminist theories as well as its potential to give rise to hierarchies as a locus of power relations. Butler too speaks of the distinction between sex and gender, claiming that 'sexuality does not follow from gender in the sense that what gender you "are" determines what kind of sexuality you will "have"(Butler *Undoing Gender*16*)*:

> […] the distinction between sex and gender serves the argument that whatever biological intractability sex appears to have, gender is culturally constructed: hence, gender is neither the causal result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as sex (Butler *Gender Trouble* 9-10).

To Butler, the concept of gender is only to reveal itself in performativity and is to be understood as an ongoing inscription, re-inscription and reconfiguration of meaning onto a body whose sex does not necessarily correspond to its gender:

> […] to understand gender as a historical category, however, is to accept that gender, understood as one way of culturally configuring a body, is open to a continual remaking, and that "anatomy" and "sex" are not without cultural framing (as the intersex movement has clearly shown). The very attribution of femininity to female bodies as if it were a natural or necessary property takes place within a normative framework in which the assignment of femininity to femaleness is one mechanism for the production of gender itself (Butler *Undoing Gender* 9-10).

However, there are some female voices amongst the most recent feminist theories which do not fully agree with the prevalence of the gender category. In 1996, Moira Gantens published an intriguing study on what she called the *imaginary body*, which, according to her, translates as the double that all humans will create on the basis of their biological bodies in order to create subjectivity and to consciously enter political and social relations. Gatens writes in the preface to her study:

> I am not concerned with physiological, anatomical, or biological understandings of the human body but rather with what will be called imaginary bodies. An imaginary body is not simply a product of subjective imagination, fantasy or folklore. The term "imaginary" will be used in a loose but nevertheless technical sense to refer to those images, symbols, metaphors and representations which help construct various forms of subjectivity (Gatens VIII).

Gatens launches thus a critique of the sex/gender distinction relying on the assumption that the body does not start its

experience in the world as a tabula rasa; it does contain the necessary germs for a subsequent development of a specific sexuality and gender; therefore, according to Gatens, it is sexual specificity which should represent the starting point of all gender theories:

> If one accepts the notion of the sexually specific subject, that is, the male or female subject, then one must dismiss the notion that patriarchy can be characterized as a system of social organization that valorizes the masculine gender over the feminine gender. Gender is not the issue; sexual difference is. The very same behaviours (whether they be masculine or feminine) have quite different personal and social significances when acted out by the male subject on the one hand and the female subject on the other. Identical social 'training', attitudes or, if you will, conditioning acquire different significances when applied to male or female subjects (Gatens 9).

Nevertheless, the vast majority of feminist theories choose to expose gender as an oppressive category, a deceit, one that has historically confined women to certain roles and patterns and that is responsible for women's historical silencing. Its marked artificial nature distinguishes it from sex and draws attention to the various mechanisms which are at work in the construction of gender.

In this sense, we believe that Sally Robinson's considerations on gender are illustrative for this gender-centred perspective, as they enclose the quintessence of all the arguments they put forward. According to her, gender's essential attributes are its mutability and transience:

> Gender, thus, can be conceived as a system of meaning, rather than a quality "owned" by individuals. And, as in all systems of meaning, the effects of gender are not always predictable, stable, or unitary. The processes by which one becomes a woman are multiple and sometimes contradictory, and the category of "women" itself is, thus, a category marked by differences and instabilities. With the fracturing of identity and the deconstruction of the "essence" of gender, feminist theorists have questioned some of the founding principles of feminist study: the authority of experience, the unity of sisterhood, the cross-cultural oppression of all women by a monolithic patriarchy. This questioning has lead toward what Linda Alcoff calls the "identity crisis in feminist theory," a crisis both over the identity of feminist theory, and the identity in feminist theory (Robinson 1).

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