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18. The Amazing Deconstructing Woman (1992)

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Postmodernism is an intellectual fashion which has established a very strong position within academic feminism and is well entrenched in women's studies courses. Postmodernist ideas have spread beyond the confines of academia and are well represented in the media, cropping up for example on *The Late Show* and *The Guardian* Women's Page.

This article is an attempt to explain what postmodernism is about, and why I think it is potentially dangerous for feminism.

Postmodern feminists tell us that feminism can benefit from a closer association with postmodernism because it corrects some of our regrettable 'essentialist tendencies'. The impression that we are being chastised by our intellectual superiors is heightened by the language postmodernists use. Their work is far from accessible to the general feminist reader. It has its own peculiarly slippery style of argument and its own esoteric vocabulary. It is also a very masculine tradition. The theoretical reference-points for most postmodern feminists are not other feminists, but male theorists such as Lacan, Derrida and Foucault.

While I do not support a position which rejects all masculine thought as useless by definition, these thinkers are not simply men. They speak from a position which is not sympathetic to feminism—indeed they can be downright misogynistic. Why are so many women sitting at the feet of these masters?

First we need to clear up some confusion over the term 'postmodernism'. There are at least three senses in which it is used, only one of which concerns me here.

First, *postmodernism* refers to an artistic and architectural style which borrows from and reassembles elements of past styles.

Second, it refers to the notion that we are living in a 'postmodern' world. There are different variants of this thesis, suggesting for example that we are living in a post-industrial age, that new technologies and new working practices have radically altered the relations between classes, or that social divisions are now based around the sphere of consumption rather than production. The overall picture is of a more fragmented and fluid society.

The third sense of the term, the one which I am dealing with here, refers to a body of theory which is also sometimes called *poststructuralism*. The word *postmodernism* is now used more frequently because it carries with it some of the ideas of the second usage — that old certainties have gone and a new mode of theorizing is appropriate.

The 'structuralism' to which this theory is 'post' (i.e., after) is a body of ideas about the structures underlying all human language and culture. It is also 'post' another form of structural explanation, marxism, and its adherents include many who used to call themselves marxist feminists. (One such is Michèle Barrett who has recently announced that she is 'nailing (her) colours to the mast of post-marxism'.)

The 'modernism' to which this body of theory is 'post', and from which it distances itself, is usually defined in relation to ideas which emerged from the 18th century, in the period known as the Enlightenment. This is a useful starting point since most postmodernists define their project in opposition to what they identify as Enlightenment thought, questioning ideas about language, the self, and truth which derive from that period. The basic tenets of postmodernism can be thus outlined as follows:

1. Language does not simply *transmit* thoughts or meaning. Thought and meaning are constructed through language, and there can be no meaning outside language. Meaning is also *relational*: a word means something only in relation to other words. Hence the word *woman* does not in and of itself mean anything. It is defined in relation to its opposite *man* (which also has no fixed meaning) and means different things in different contexts.
2. There is no essential self which exists outside culture and language. Subjectivity is fragmented and always in process: our identities are products of the way in which we are positioned (or position ourselves) within knowledge and culture. (This is referred to as 'de-centring the subject'.) Our own experiences as women cannot therefore be taken as an unproblematic starting point for feminist theory and politics, because there is no experience outside language and culture. For example, doing housework for a man can (theoretically) be 'experienced' as a labour of love or as exploitative drudgery, depending on whether it is understood in terms of a discourse of traditional femininity or a feminist discourse.
3. There is no objective scientific 'truth' which exists out there waiting to be discovered. Knowledges are 'discursive constructs'. This idea comes from

Michel Foucault, for whom discourses (ways of thinking and talking about the world) produce objects of knowledge, rather than describing pre-existing objects. Knowledges and discourses can be deconstructed — taken apart — in such a way as to reveal that they are not universal truths but rather discourses constructed from particular positions. This leads to the sceptical dismissal of grand theoretical ‘metanarratives’, like marxism, which purport to explain the social world. At its most extreme this scepticism implies a denial of *any* material reality.

On the basis of these propositions, postmodernists oppose all forms of ‘essentialism’, any perspective which posits social groups or structures (like ‘women’ or ‘patriarchy’) as objects which exist independently of our understandings of them. Feminist postmodernists, for example, contest the idea that women exist as a natural category. They seek to ‘deconstruct’ gender categories, to reveal the ways in which they have been culturally constructed, to demonstrate that they are ‘regulatory fictions’ rather than natural facts.

The idea of deconstruction derives from the work of Jacques Derrida. In general it means looking closely at any text, argument or assumption in order to reveal the inconsistencies and paradoxes which underpin it. Statements which define what women are can be shown to contain contradictory assumptions. For example, we are told that femininity is ‘natural’ and yet women are constantly exhorted to work hard at producing femininity. This suggests that ‘femininity’ is not natural but rather the product of the discourses which define it.

Some feminists, like Jane Flax, argue that feminism is necessarily postmodern; that postmodernism and feminism share a scepticism about knowledge, truth, language and the self. To some extent Flax is correct. Feminists have long questioned what counts as knowledge and have revealed the androcentric bias underlying much of what passes for truth in, for example, scientific ‘proof’ of women’s inferiority. We have long known that language is not a neutral medium of communication, which is why we have been concerned to challenge linguistic sexism. We know that meaning is not fixed: that what it means to be a woman can shift, and hence we have always contested essentialist understandings of gender. We are also aware that there is no unitary, consistent self. What feminist has not experienced desires and feelings at variance with her political ideals?

To some extent, then, postmodernists seem to be reinventing the wheel. Yet postmodern feminists are keen to distance themselves from other feminists and to demonstrate that those others harbour essentialist assumptions. Radical feminism

in particular is castigated for this crime. Mythical radical feminists are cited who apparently believe in women's natural difference from men. Those who do espouse this view are in fact very few: some eco-feminists, some American radical feminists, and some European 'difference theorists'. Most radical feminists argue that masculinity and femininity are socially constructed and are just as concerned as any postmodernist to challenge essentialist conceptions of women. But postmodern feminism refuses to accord academic credibility to feminist theory unless it is affiliated to the work of fashionable male theorists.

But if we are all engaged in deconstructing the category 'women' and questioning the basis of knowledge, what's new about postmodern feminism? What is new is a theoretical project which takes deconstruction and scepticism to such lengths that it threatens to undermine the possibility of feminist knowledge and feminist politics. Three features of postmodernism are particularly crucial here.

Firstly, de-centring the subject means recognising that subjectivity is culturally constituted, that there is no fixed feminine identity, that what it means to be a woman for any one of us and can shift, can be contradictory. This is fine, but the emphasis on the temporary, fluctuating character of identity can undercut any positive identities we construct for ourselves. In particular it challenges the possibility of our taking a collective stance as women, or even as specific categories of women such as Black women or lesbians.

Secondly, postmodernism stresses meaning is not fixed in objects or events, but is a product of language and discourse. So meaning shifts, and can be contested. Feminists have, of course, consistently challenged the meanings of dominant patriarchal discourse. But if no one set of meanings is more valid than any other, who is to say that feminist meanings are any more valid than anyone else's? What basis is there for arguing that a feminist reading of forced sexual intercourse as rape is any more valid than the rapist's interpretation of it as pleasurable seduction? Regarding meaning as *entirely* fluid can mean denying even the starkest of material realities.

This view of meaning connects with the third aspect of postmodernism — scepticism about truth and knowledge. Postmodernist suspicion of metanarratives, of explanatory theory, raises questions not only about the possibility of any theory of women's subordination but of any systematic description of it. Even the statement that 'women are oppressed' is problematic, for what do we mean by 'women', and by whose criteria are they/we oppressed? Once they go this far, postmodern feminists' claim to be feminists becomes dubious. Indeed we might wonder why they cling to the identity 'feminist' and why they consistently address an audience of other feminists, when they call all categories and identities into question.

Feminist challenges to malestream knowledge have not usually been based on the assumption that no valid knowledge is possible, but on the idea that feminist knowledge, which takes account of women's experience, can be more valid than what previously passed for knowledge. But when 'women', 'experience' and 'knowledge' all become problematic concepts, we can find ourselves with no place from which to speak as women, make political demands or challenge patriarchal structures.

Postmodern feminists warn of the dangers of using 'women' as a unitary, absolutist category and of making statements about 'women' in general which actually only apply to particular women — white, Western, middle-class and heterosexual ones. Trying to come to terms with the complexities of these differences is a real problem for feminist theorists, but I am not convinced that postmodernists have the solution. In fact, although they harp on the arrogance of those who construct general theories of women's subordination, or who dare to speak for all women, they themselves are one of the most exclusive feminist groupings in existence. Their own work silences other women very effectively, and they are as guilty of white, middle-class heterosexist bias as anyone else.

For instance, Denise Riley's book *Am I That Name?* opens with a reference to a speech made by the black American feminist Sojourner Truth in 1851. Riley doesn't bother to quote the speech — apart from the refrain 'Aint I a Woman?' — but simply uses it to give political credibility to her historical deconstruction of the category 'women'. Here, in part, is what Sojourner Truth said:

That man over there says women need to be helped into carriages and over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages...or gives me any best place! And aint I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And aint I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man — when I could get it — and bear the lash as well! And aint I a woman? I have borne thirteen children and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And aint I a woman?

This speech does of course challenge the naturalness of the concept of 'women', pointing out that the idea of women's 'natural' frailty is demonstrably false. It is also, however, an attack on the exclusivity of the category. Sojourner Truth's words can be read as a plea to be included, as an affirmation of her womanhood, rather than as a statement that 'women' do not exist. According to Riley, a new Sojourner

Truth might say 'ain't I a fluctuating identity?! It is, as Tania Modleski comments, rather odd that a writer concerned to demonstrate the historical variability of the category 'women', should reach out 'across racial lines, historical eras and national boundaries to claim commonality of belief with a black female abolitionist'. In her view this demonstrates a lack of sensitivity to the fact that a black female slave in 19th century America had 'little freedom to fluctuate' in any way.

Treating the category 'women' as entirely fictional ignores the material realities which constrain us into membership of that category. Those constraints are more total for some women than others: as Modleski also says, it is only white, middle-class, academic feminists who have the luxury of being able to deny that they are women.

I do not, however, think it is useful to respond by asserting the existence of some essential womanhood which is suppressed by masculine theory. This is effectively the position taken by Somer Brodribb in one of the first feminist critiques of the misogynistic traditions of thought from which postmodernism developed. While impressive in many respects, Brodribb's book is marred by its assumption that such theory, and indeed male domination in general, derives from something essential about masculinity: a male denial of nature and repudiation of the mother, rooted in men's reproductive experience.

For Brodribb, anti-essentialism equates with being anti-women. For example, she criticises Gayle Rubin's notion of a sex/gender system because of its reliance on Claude Levi-Strauss's theory that 'the exchange of women' underlies all human culture. Her objection is not that this presupposes what it sets out to explain (i.e. women would have to be already subordinate in order to be exchanged as objects). Nor does it worry her that it is so universalistic that it represents little advance on the idea that women are naturally subordinate. What she objects to is that it is insufficiently biological, that it repudiates the body, that it represents kinship as an abstract relation between men. According to Brodribb, 'kinship is not an abstract concept for women: it is experienced materially... in the process of birth'.

Brodribb objects not only to postmodernism, but to any perspective which claims that gender is socially constructed. This she sees as a denial of the female body which is 'sexism not liberation', which implies 'a liberal laissez faire gender economy' and which privileges 'culture over nature once again'. Has she not noticed that the idea of women's 'natural' difference continues to be used to justify our subordination?

Brodribb castigates postmodernism for its anti-materialism, but her idea of materialism is not mine. She equates the material with the fact that women give

birth and men do not. Where does this leave those of us who are not mothers? Are we not women?

There is an alternative position, properly materialist and anti-essentialist, deriving from the work of feminists such as Christine Delphy and Monique Wittig. They maintain that gender has no natural basis, but they differ from postmodernists in claiming that it rests on material foundations. For Delphy and Wittig, sexual difference is the product, not the basis, of women's oppression. Women exist as a political category (and a class) because of patriarchy. Within this formulation it is possible to retain a conceptualisation of womanhood as a material reality without positing some essential, pre-given femininity. We can think of 'women' as a socially constructed category without denying the existence of women.

Although postmodernists say that they are sceptical of claims to truth, they make their own truth claims. Although they claim to be anti-essentialist, they essentialise other feminisms, especially radical feminisms. The charge of essentialism is used to deny the existence of women as a political constituency and to tell us we must think in terms of gender relations rather than women's oppression.

This may earn kudos within male-dominated academia, but it plays into the hands of those who would like to see women's studies de-radicalised, those who find the study of gender less threatening than knowledge constructed from women's standpoint, in a word, those who have no interest in women's liberation. We are facing the threat of 'feminism without women' (the title of Tania Modleski's book). 'Women' are being deconstructed out of existence and 'gender' is replacing women as the starting point of feminist analysis. The logical outcome of postmodern feminism, is, indeed, postfeminism.

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