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The laugh of the medusa summary

Share this: Facebook Twitter Reddit LinkedIn WhatsApp Throughout history, women have been excluded from any kind of writing that could allow them the participation in the making of history and culture. Being considered as creatures of lesser rank in mental capacities and intellect, women have been, over centuries, kept in the dark by a patriarchal system that has successfully muted their needs for expression, be it physical, oral or written. In her fundamental essay *The Laugh of the Medusa*, Hélène Cixous, French philosopher and feminist critic, openly introduces this idea of woman's need for writing as a biological drive which intimately relies on her ceasing back and mastering her own body that has been violently misued by male's rhetoric , as Toril Moi asserts that 'always and everywhere, the rational, active, masculine intellect operates on the passive, objectified, feminized body' (189). It's only from the bodily experience that women, according to Cixous, can give birth to an «écriture féminine» which will subvert the phallogocentric discourse of masculine writing, along with the logocentric representational system through which it functions. The purpose of this paper is to examine the key insights that the author explores in her essay, mainly the feminine writing with the idea of sexual differences. It is, also, necessary to consider, in the following stages, how Cixous makes use of Freud's and Lacan's psychoanalysis and Derrida's deconstructivist theory to disrupt the phallogocentric assumptions, hence to break up with all forms of repression against women. A particular focus will be on the critic's contribution to French feminism and Anglo-American feminist theory. Get Help With Your Essay If you need assistance with writing your essay, our professional essay writing service is here to help! Essay Writing Service Le Rire de la Méduse was written by Cixous in 1975, and translated into English as *The Laugh of the Medusa* in 1976 by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen. This influential essay, essentially addressing women in order to «bring them to writing» (Cixous 875), is expressed in a beautiful and poetic language to convey the idea of the existence of an écriture féminine, which is already used by the author. As with many of her writings , Cixous's *The Laugh of the Medusa* revises sexual differences between men and women from past to present, anticipating a future radical change in the perception of this notion which would only take shape if woman takes back a body that is hers, from the masculine repressing language, in order to employ it as a cause and effect of a new genre of writing which Cixous introduces as the feminine writing. The whole premise of the essay is that «Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing .» (Cixous 875). In the light of this idea, the critic goes on to relate women's writing to their bodily experiences that represent a source of desire and urge for creativity. In other words, for a woman to be able to break up with the old traditional doormat in her skin, she must trace her own body with a feminine language. As a result, women will create their own tradition of writing, embarking from the past and its repressive language. Over centuries, masculine discourse has been the dominant and the stronger one. Women had no word to say in a patriarchal universe where, as Cixous states, they were regarded as «dark» and «dangerous» (878). Women have, accordingly, developed a sense of resentment for other women and themselves under the influence of the masculine ideology. To break up with this complex, Cixous calls woman to manifest through a writing that belongs to her ; but which can neither be defined nor theorized (883) since, as it can be deduced, language is male's property, and there is no room to theorize a feminine writing within the masculine dominant discourse. However, the feminine mode of writing can be described as revolutionary against the phallogocentric language and thought (888). Cixous's point is to approach this genre of writing in relation to sexual differences and gender in order to demonstrate how these differences have served historico-cultural purposes to hinder women's intellectual capacities. She goes further to discuss the traditional idea of bisexuality - as neutrality- that engenders the fear of lacking , contrasted with a bisexuality, that allows one to identify one self as having sexual orientation toward the two sexes. From this equation, Cixous concludes that «woman is bisexual» by the nature of her organs and the turning shifts of events; whereas man cannot be so without losing his phallogocentric masculine identity (884). In the same way, she believes that writing is bisexual, for women should write to women and men without no exclusion. Throughout the article, Cixous sensibilizes women to the urgent need of a universal revolution against the phallogocentric discourse to which they have been the signified subject. By creating their a discourse of their own, women will fly through and, at the same time, steal back that which is already theirs , their voices that have been repressed. The author points out to the fact that this subjugation has resulted in creating a female voice consciousness which, aware of the difficulties that women have undergone, reclaims their socio-cultural identity and their natural rights. She also argues for women's freedom to have children or not to have any, without being «threatened» or blamed for the choices they make in life (890). The main purpose of this study is to analyze the key insights that Cixous discusses in *The Laugh of the Medusa*, along with the major influences that affect her writing, namely the Derridian deconstruction and psychoanalytical theory. As its title indicates, the essay includes the «Medusa» as a metaphor to portray woman's beauty, oppression and intelligence at the same time. By using this Greek mythical figure , Cixous hits two birds with one stone : she firstly alludes to women being treated badly by their male counterparts, as Medusa was once ill-treated and raped . On the other hand, the author also hints to women's jealousy of and hatred to other women under the influence of the masculine worldview. Cixous goes on to develop this idea when she argues that men «have committed the greatest crime against women. Insidiously, violently, they have led them to hate women, to be their own enemies». In the same way, the Medusa's metaphor is associated with the modern psychoanalytic interpretations of Sigmund Freud who refers to the Medusa's head as «the supreme talisman who provides the image of castration - associated in the child's mind with the discovery of maternal sexuality - and its denial» (Freud). Cixous takes on the idea of castration, by which the phallogocentric mind is haunted, and relates it to the Medusa's image so as to prove that man is unconsciously weak at the sight of the feminine sex, to the point that he is «consumed, as Freud and his followers note, by a fear of being a woman» (884). At this level, the critic implicitly alludes to the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, who follows Freud in his concept of Wunsch to arrive at a «desire» that is associated with a lack. According to Lacan's theory of Lack, as explained by Joel Dor in his Introduction to the Reading of Lacan, woman's desire towards the masculine body does not originate from the body itself as the object of desire ; rather, it originates from her lacking a penis (Dor 236). Ironically, Cixous refutes this «phallogocentric» analysis arguing that her personal desire of the other is for the other, and that «a desire originating from a lack» is much poor and lacking(891). She goes further to criticize women who madly fetishize the masculine sex, treating them of «the woman of yesterday» who is either kept in the dark ages, idolizing the traditional way the big penis takes her ; or falsely modernized with naive virtuous thinking as Cixous affirms here : «They still exist, easy and numerous victims of the oldest of farces: either they're cast in the original silent version in which, as titanesses lying under the mountains they make with their quivering, they never see erected that theoretic monument to the golden phallus looming, in the old manner, over their bodies. Or, coming today out of their infans period and into the second, "enlightened" version of their virtuous de-basement, they see themselves suddenly assaulted by the builders of the analytic empire and, as soon as they've begun to formulate the new desire, naked, nameless, so happy at making an appearance, they're taken in their bath by the new old men, and then, whoops! Luring them with flashy signifiers, the demon of interpretation» (892) Following this idea, Cixous is harshly attacking the masculine phallogocentric values in the personae of Freud and Lacan, whom she accuses of exploiting the new version of «modern» woman to satisfy their sexual needs while they're reducing them to an inferior and negative position. One cannot understand Cixous's ideas without going back to the Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theories. If we examine Freud's interpretation of sexual differences which place man in a superior position for biological reasons , it would then be obvious why he has been criticized by feminists , including Cixous. Though she mainly builds her theoretical legacy on psychoanalysis, precisely Freud's, Cixous uses this latter's analysis of developmental theory and gender roles -which are based on the biological differences between man and woman- as a counter-argument to assert that, though there is a sexual difference, women should be treated equally, and not in terms of the Lacanian binary oppositions, as she states : «writing has been run by a libidinal and cultural-hence political, typically masculine-economy; that this is a locus where the repression of women has been perpetuated, over and over, more or less consciously, and in a manner that's frightening since it's often hidden or adorned with the mystifying charms of fiction; that this locus has grossly exaggerated all the signs of sexual opposition (and not sexual difference), where woman has never her turn to speak». (879) In the same way, Cixous criticizes Lacan's theory of phallogocentrism which posits the phallus in the centre of the masculine being. Furthermore, the critic employs this primacy of the phallus in the Derridian deconstructivist critique of logocentrism to coin the term «phallogocentrism», which refers to a (superior) masculine language centered upon the phallus, opposed to a (deficient) feminine language which lacks a phallus. In other words, her writing is a deconstructivist one through which she undermines the phallogocentric ideology that dominates language (Tidd 98). In addition to the medusa's image which is used by the author to overcome Freud's «castration» and Lacan's «lack», is the metaphor of Dora that strongly disturbs Freud's legacy in psychoanalysis and therapy. When she directly addresses Dora as «the true mistress of the Signifier» (886), Cixous evokes the story of humiliated girl who was manipulated by her father as a pawn in a sexual game between him and his mistress's husband, and later by Freud's therapy that tried to convince her of the necessity to play the game. As a result, the girl was a subject of a double oppression, applied firstly by the father, and secondly by Freud. The case of Dora in the essay, if it alludes to patriarchal ideology and oppression of the female's voice, it does not fail to deconstruct the Freudian assumptions of male superiority and the Lacanian theory of «the Name of the Father» which prescribes the father as a symbol of law and order. For Cixous, the name of Dora represents more than an example of the psychological violence caused by male's oppression; she rather employs it as an icon of female's revolution and manifest (Showalter 332). The Laugh of the Medusa is the most significant example of Cixous's «écriture féminine». Rich of artistic metaphors and innovative ideas, this influential essay is inscribed as a fundamental work of art within literary and critical theory. Influenced by the deconstructivist and differentialist thought, Cixous's writing has been effective in undermining the patriarchal dominance over language. By revising the question of sexual differences existing in the psychoanalytical theories of Freud and Lacan, she deconstructs the equation of the binary oppositions applied to the couple man-woman, while intelligently adopting the difference to prove the equality rather than the opposition between the sexes. The idea is recognized through feminist critiques like Shiach's «Their Symbolic Exists- it Holds Power» in which she notes : «Cixous has represented the process of differentiation in more social terms, and has offered the possibility of more hopeful conclusions: the construction of new sorts of identity, which cut across 'dual hierarchized oppositions» (165) Her poetic language and feminine style is a demonstration of what she calls «écriture féminine». Influenced by her reading of James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, Cixous seems to take up their experimentation and modernist mode of writing, herded with a feminine sensual voice and experience, as essential features of a new form, which is the feminine writing. Consequently, introducing this idea, among many others, into the critical theory has undoubtedly made of Cixous one of the most prominent figures of French feminism. When translated into English, Cixous's *The Laugh* has gained international interest, mainly by Anglo-American feminists. Admittedly, the author has been often criticized, for considering the sexual differences and making them as a basis for her argument, which, for certain critiques, cannot but reinforce the inequality, hence, repression. To make sense of her ideas, however, one has to contextualize them within a poststructuralist framework. Being a deconstructivist par-excellence, Cixous emphasizes the differences in order to deconstruct them. For a deep understanding of her writing, it is crucial to be familiar with psychoanalytical concepts of Freud and his readers, so as to make sense of them in a Cixousian shape. Karen L. Taylor recognizes Cixous's legacy, against Morag Shiach's critique , when she states : Furthermore, through her writing, Cixous engages in a psychoanalytical exploration of the feminine. Reading and writing are, for her, the means to grapple with the enigma of male / female relations. She has been criticized for her psychoanalytical style, influenced by Jacques Lacan, and marked by a superabundance of images. Nonetheless, Cixous has been instrumental in establishing a new form of literature that lies somewhere between myth and novel. » (70) What Cixous does is more than claiming equal civil rights for women with regards to their male counterpart. What she does is deconstructing the patriarchal language that hierarchizes woman into inferior positions, calling at the meanwhile for a new mode of writing that inscribes the feminine as equal to the masculine, hence, anticipating a possibility of change in social structures. Through the «écriture féminine», the feminine body «will produce far more radical effects of political and social changes than some might like to think» (Cixous 882). Share this: Facebook Twitter Reddit LinkedIn WhatsApp

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